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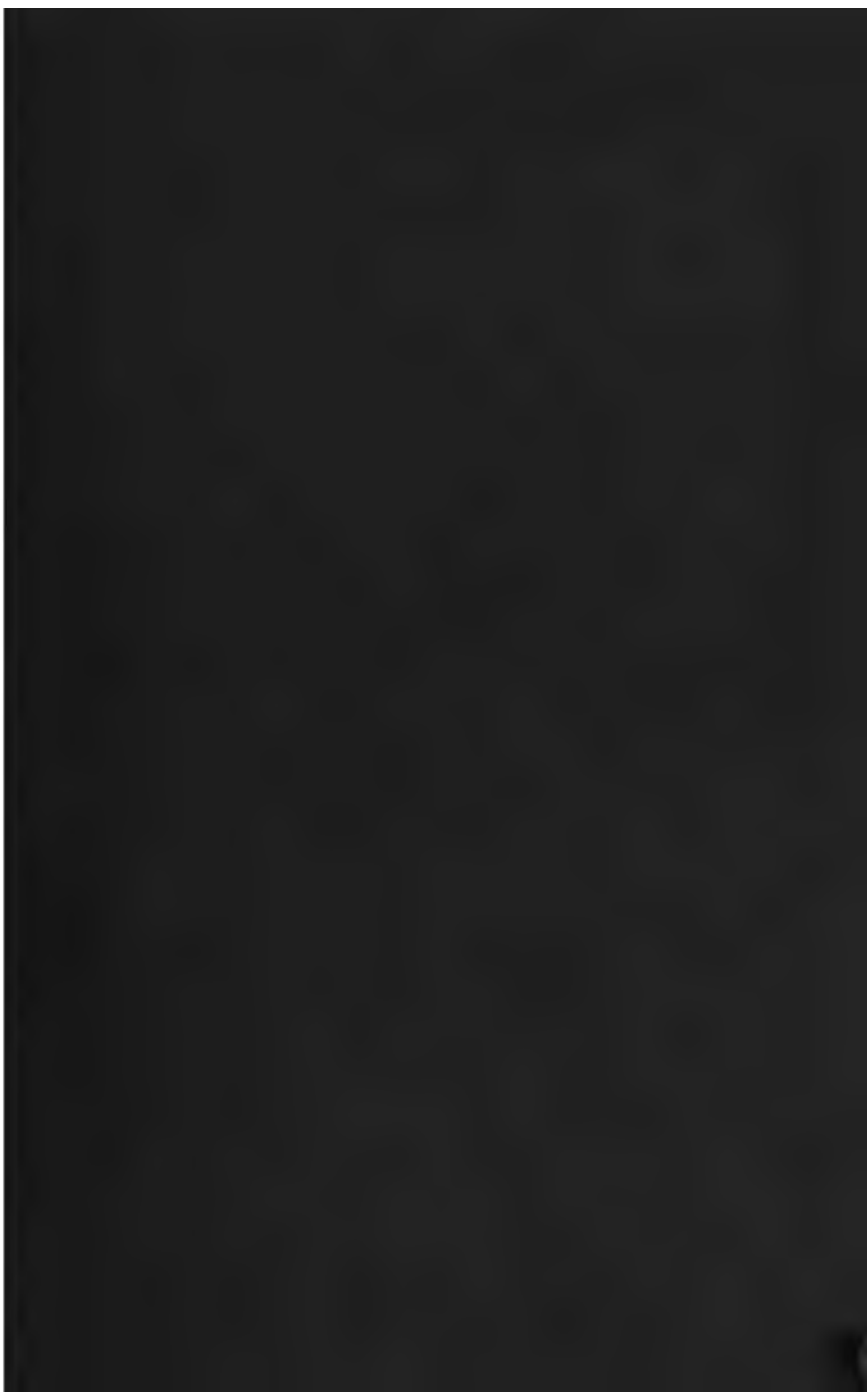
Fresh from the Fens

THREE LINCOLNSHIRE LASSES



A STORY BY E. WARD.





1st Edm

F. Stevens.

from Dr. Jay.

(SW)



AVONMINSTER.

Fresh from the Fens

A STORY OF

THREE LINCOLNSHIRE LASSES

By E. WARD

With Eight Illustrations

LONDON
SEELEY AND CO., LIMITED
ESSEX STREET, STRAND
1891

AKW 13:13

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Fresh from the Fens

CHAPTER I

THE BLACK KITTEN

IT was such a surprise.

Nothing the least bit like it had ever happened before. And surprises came so seldom to that quiet Lincolnshire Rectory that the children there hardly knew what to make of one.

So the three small round mouths were opened in astonished wonderment, and the six big gray-blue eyes were fixed immovably on mother's face. None of the quaint-looking trio attempted to speak, the whole attention being concentrated on the gentle face smiling down upon them.

But Patty, the eldest of the three little maidens, was old enough to notice that there was a shade of anxiety upon mother's brow which betokened some unwonted care, and she fancied there was something almost pleading in the tones that concluded the explanatory speech she was addressing to her children.

'And so, darlings, I am sure you will all try to be

very good, and give as little trouble as possible, but remember always how kind it is of Aunt Hilda to invite you all, and give you such a charming holiday. It will seem strange at first, being without father or mother, or even nurse; but you will soon get used to it, and try to be happy—will you not, little daughters?—so that I may hear good accounts of you, to cheer me up whilst you are all away?’

Patty tried to meet mother’s smile by another, like the brave little woman she was, though the attempt was not a great success; but Dolly’s face was turned away, for she *could not* quite keep back the tell-tale tears which the thought of the parting from mother had brought, and yet she did not want to seem fretful or ungrateful when Aunt Hilda had been so kind. As for Letty, the youngest, who was more ready of speech than either of her sisters, she summed up the public sentiment in the following terse sentences:

‘I don’t think it will be at all nice to go away and stay with Aunt Hilda. We’ve none of us ever seen her. She never comes to see us. I don’t like strangers. I’d rather stop at home.’

‘So would I,’ whispered Dolly, under her breath, ‘unless mother went with us.’

‘But we will try to like it if mother wants us to,’ added Patty quickly, for she saw the quiver that passed over mother’s face, and knew that it was as hard for her to send her darlings away, as it was for them to go.

Mother gave her eldest little daughter a quick smile of gratitude, and then stooped and laid a gentle hand on Dolly’s bowed head.

‘You cannot stay at home, my darlings, just now.

I must send you all away somewhere: and as neither father nor I nor even good nurse can possibly leave the parish at such a time, it is better for you to be with relations, even though you do not know them, than with strangers, who would know nothing about you.'

'But why must we go, mother?' asked Letty, nestling up close to her. 'You never had to send us away before. We haven't been naughty, have we? It isn't for a punishment?'

The words were so anxiously spoken that they evoked a little laugh from mother.

'No, no, darlings, it is not that. It is because something has happened in the parish that makes father and me very anxious. There have been several cases of illness there—a bad kind of fever—and I am very much afraid we shall have a great many more: and I want my little girls away as soon as possible, partly for fear they should fall ill themselves, partly because we shall be so very busy, looking after the poor sick folk, that there would be often no one at home to care for you. So father and I turned it over in our heads, and then I wrote to Aunt Hilda, and her answer came this morning. She is going next week to her beautiful house amongst the mountains and lakes, and she will take you all away with her. You will join her party at the big junction, where she will have to change carriages. She will be there first, and will be waiting for you when you arrive. It will be all quite easy for you.'

Dolly's head was resting by this time on mother's shoulder. Her words were the merest whisper.

'I suppose you could not come, too?'

‘No, darling. Think : how could I leave the parish, with so many cases of illness there?’

The answer was a long-drawn sigh ; but the claims of the parish were too well understood by the clergyman’s little daughters for there to be any thought of disputing them. Indeed, Patty volunteered at once that of course the parish could not spare them, and only added, with a little diffidence and hesitation :

‘Only you know, mother dear, if you would let us stay with you, I do think we could be useful too. We could go about to the sick people with soup, and we could make the beds and lay the table, and make tea and toast and boil eggs for you and father at home. We should be so much happier helping you and the parish, if we only might stay—though of course we will do just what you like best.’

There was a sparkle almost like that of tears on mother’s eyelashes as she looked into the three faces turned so pleadingly towards her, and it was easy to see what the answer would have been had she consulted her wishes alone. As it was, however, there was no faltering in the tones which pronounced the final decision.

‘My darlings, you must go ; it is quite decided. It would not be right to keep you here, though the house will lose its sunshine, I think, when our little girls leave us. So now I will go down and send a letter to Aunt Hilda, thanking her for her great kindness, and telling her that you will be at the big junction on Tuesday, by the train she named in her letter.’

‘Tuesday ! Oh, mother dear, so soon as that ?’

‘Yes, Dolly, my pet, it is better to go as soon as you

can. Aunt Hilda asks me to choose either Tuesday or Thursday, whichever suits us best, as the day for the journey, for she does not mind which it is, and I have settled in my own mind for Tuesday, for the sooner you get away out of these low fens, the better father and I will be pleased. And I feel sure that when once the strangeness has worn off, you will enjoy the beautiful country, so different from anything we see here, and the companionship of your cousins, though they are most of them older than any of you.'

'I don't want to see none of them—not one bit,' asserted Letty, with sturdy independence. Letty was strong in negatives, especially when at all excited. 'I don't care for other children—especially when they are big. I like grown-up people best.'

Mother laughed a little as she stroked Letty's head. It had been noticed before this by those in authority that Letty was developing a strength of will and an originality of expression beyond that of her elder sisters. Not that the child was self-willed or difficult to manage, but merely seemed endued with a latent force of character greater than any that had so far been observed in the others.

This individuality seemed to assert itself in ways over which the little one certainly had no control: for whilst the cropped heads of the elder pair were always smooth as the softest silk, Letty's was covered with rebellious little curls, that no amount of brushing ever made quite tidy, and which clustered round her brow almost down to the eyes, and gave a character of its own to the mobile little face beneath. Then the eyes themselves were so very bright and sparkling, that

they drew attention at once. For whilst Patty's were intent and thoughtful, and Dolly's soft and trusting, Letty's were full of mischievous glee, or, in other moods; alight with eager interest, or even with mutinous resistance.

So that Letty was in one sense of the word the leading spirit in that nursery, though Patty held nominal control, and was looked up to by both her juniors with a considerable amount of respect. For it was no uncommon thing for mother to confide little secrets to her dependable eldest daughter, and Patty was in many ways older than her years. There was never the least struggle for supremacy amongst the three little sisters: they loved each other dearly, and the atmosphere of their home was one that promoted all gentle feelings and held in check the worse ones. If Letty led the van in the play-hours, and on occasions when there was any innocent mischief in the wind, Patty ruled in lesson-time, and kept order in the quaintest possible way, helping Letty up the steep hill of learning, and playing the part of mother's coadjutor in a hundred little nameless offices. That lonely Rectory amongst the flat fens was a wonderfully peaceful and happy home, and the children had never found it dull, or longed to see the world that lay beyond the parish boundaries. In father, mother, and the all-important parish, their whole lives seemed to centre: and the very fact that they had no playmates of their own generation in the place, and had always associated with people older than themselves, had given rise to the feelings that now prompted Letty's remark.

'Well, Letty, there will be plenty of grown-up people

as well,' answered mother, still smiling, though her face was not without traces of anxiety; 'there will be Uncle Marmaduke and Aunt Hilda, and then there will be the dear grandfather, about whom you have heard so many stories.'

Letty looked up quickly, and so did the other two.

'Oh, will grandfather be there? I don't think I knew that. Is he going to stay with Aunt Hilda, too?'

'He lives with Aunt Hilda. Did you not know that, children? I must have told you before, I think.'

'Yes, mother dear, I knew,' answered Patty readily; whilst Letty, after a moment's thought, cried out:

'Why does he always live with Aunt Hilda? Why doesn't he sometimes live with us? I don't think it's fair. I shall tell him so when I see him. I shall bring him home with us. I think it might be rather nice to have a grandfather living on the premises: and he could go and see the old people in the parish. He would like to do that, I should think.'

Mother smiled faintly: there was a little pink flush in her cheek that was not usually there.

'Grandfather is getting to be an old man now, Letty, and old gentlemen are not fond of travelling about and paying visits. They like to have their own things about them, and to stay quietly at home.'

'So do little people, too—only they can't always do it,' answered Letty in her shrewd, arch way. 'And I suppose grandfather was not *always* old, yet he hasn't never been here. If he can go away up to the pretty house in the mountains with Aunt Hilda, I don't see why he can't come and see us too sometimes.'

Mother did not answer. The pink flush had deepened

in her cheek, and she rose up, putting Dolly on her feet, and holding out a hand to Letty.

‘Now suppose we all go downstairs together. Letty can help me to write my letter to Aunt Hilda, whilst Patty makes some toast for father’s tea, and Dolly finds his slippers and puts them to warm. Fanny has lighted a little fire in the dining-room, because the rain has made the air so chilly to-day.’

The children rose eagerly to do their mother’s bidding. In the Rectory, where only two servants were kept, and where means, always narrow, had grown more so than ever in these years of bad harvests and agricultural depression, the little daughters were used to perform many small offices of love for their parents and the household generally. Patty was a thorough little housekeeper already, and could be trusted to look after a roasting joint or a boiling kettle as well as many a girl twice her age. It was her great pleasure to be entrusted with any little duty of the kind for her parents, just as it was one of Letty’s special delights to watch her mother write a letter, and help her by sticking on the stamp and fastening down the envelope. It seemed to her such a wonderful thing that the letters always seemed to travel safely. She could not rid herself of a secret admiration for their cleverness and independence in finding their way all about the country without any blunders. She sometimes wondered whether she should manage as well if *she* were popped into a letter-box with a stamp stuck on her forehead. She wondered, too, what the effect upon a letter would be, if the words were all shaken together and pieced out differently. To-night she thought

more than ever about this, as she stood watching mother's pen flying over the paper. It would be so nice if she only knew some way of getting the words all jumbled up, so as to mean that they would *not* come, instead of that they would. But, unluckily, Letty knew of no way in which this transformation could be effected, and she no longer had any hope that the letter would lose its way. Aunt Hilda was sure to get it next day, and they would be obliged to go away on Tuesday for a long, long time and not see father or mother again till they got back.

Letty was so absorbed in these thoughts that she loosed her hold on the little black kitten she had picked up from the hearth, and so puss, making the most of her opportunities, sprang upon the writing-table, and made a dash at the quickly moving pen, smudging the word 'Tuesday' right across, and evoking a shriek of laughter from the child. Mother put the offending paw back with a playful pat.

'Oh, naughty kitten, to smudge my letter, just as the post is going, and I have not time to write another!'

'Kitty doesn't want you to write it. She won't like us to go away. She'll have nobody to play with: she will be so dull. She'd like to blot it all over, and then you couldn't send it.'

'I should have to send a telegram in that case,' answered mother with a smile, and that sent Letty off into a brown study, for she saw that things had got quite beyond her now. And neither mother nor child noticed that Kitty's mischievous paw had turned the word 'Tuesday' into something much more like 'Thursday,' for mother was in a hurry to catch the

post, and sealed her missive up without reading it over again. So Miss Letty, who had so often speculated as to the consequences of altering a written letter, was about to become involved in just such a result her own small self. But no one would surely have guessed at the strange train of circumstances which commenced with the blot in mother's letter from kitty's restless black paw.

But father had now come in, and Letty ran off to meet him and drag him to his easy-chair, laughing at the idea of having a fire in July, and finding it so nice and cosy. The thin careworn face of the clergyman brightened and softened as his little daughters clustered round him, bringing him his tea to his comfortable chair, and vying with each other who should first anticipate his wants. He had a very fine noble head, and a face which inspired love and trust wherever he went. The little girls were quite certain that such a father and mother as theirs never lived before, and perhaps they were not far wrong.

Letty had a great deal to say about the piece of news they had just been told, and was eager to enlist father's sympathies on their side.

'I should have thought you would like us to be at home. I should have thought you would miss us if we all go away. Don't you like us to be here to take care of you, when you come in tired from the parish?'

And father's answer—if answer it could be called—was one of the close, warm kisses that all his children had learnt to prize so well. And as he looked first at the faces of his little daughters, and then across at mother, Letty became aware, in a sudden and unex-

pected fashion, of a fact new to her childish mind—which was that grown-up people sometimes have to do things that neither please themselves nor anybody else, but are imposed upon them by circumstances over which they have no control. At least she was quite sure that neither father nor mother at all enjoyed the prospect of living without their three little girls for a somewhat indefinite period.

As for the three little Lincolnshire lasses themselves, they could not imagine what life would or could be like, lived apart from father and mother, and that familiar and well-loved parish, away in that lonely land of fens.

CHAPTER II

AN EXPLANATION

THE very last evening had come. The three little sisters lay in their small white beds, side by side in the long, low attic room that had been their night-nursery ever since they could remember ; and it had been so hard to realize that next night would find them in quite a different place that some natural tears had been shed, whilst good, faithful nurse had been hugged almost to death by the bear-like embraces of her nurslings.

True, there had been moments when the projected visit to Aunt Hilda had brought laughter instead of tears, when, under the influence of mother's smiles and judicious words of encouragement, the little girls had begun to look forward to the new sights and wonderful changes in a spirit of pleasurable excitement. They were not quite impervious to the fascinating attraction of novelty, only they were such regular little home-birds that the dread of leaving their own nest was almost too much for the pleasure of seeing the world, and meeting with the adventures which Letty was certain would fall to their lot. Letty was gifted with a vivid imagination of her own, and she was quite

sure that a great many strange things would happen to them if they went away from their home, and lived in a house right up among the mountains. The little Lincolnshire children had never seen a mountain—had seen nothing steeper or higher than the hill on which part of Lincoln stands. So they naturally felt that there must be something very romantic in living in a hill-girt house; and as Letty argued with characteristic earnestness, wherever places were romantic, people were sure to have a lot of adventures.

Dolly's thoughts ran more upon the new people she was to meet, for she was the shyest of the trio, and it seemed very formidable to be going amongst strangers, when there would be no mother to nestle up against—no kind hand to hold hers fast when the moment of the dreaded introduction came. Fortunately for Dolly, she had great confidence in Patty, and was tolerably happy so long as she had her sister to depend upon; but then Patty was not free from nervousness herself, and she confided to Dolly that she was sure Aunt Hilda would be very different from mother.

'Mother would have written another letter after her invitation had been accepted,' remarked the shrewd little maiden—'a nice long letter, with loving messages in it. Aunt Hilda only sent a post-card to say, "All well: will meet children as arranged." Mother says that people who have lots of servants and things to look after, and are accustomed to travelling, do not think anything of a journey, and are too busy to waste words over it; but I know that *she* would always be just what she is now, if she had all the servants and all the money in the world.'

Dolly of course was of the same opinion, and was rather nervous at the idea of facing this grand aunt, who was called 'Lady' instead of 'Mrs.,' like their mother and most of the people of their acquaintance. They all knew that mother had been a Miss Tremain before she married father, and that her uncle had been called Sir Marmaduke, as her brother-in-law and their uncle was now; but they had never thought much about these grand relations before. They had not seemed to belong to them except in name, and Patty was old enough to wonder why this was, and to puzzle her head over the notion that there was something curious and secret about it all.

But these three little maidens, dearly as they loved their parents, and entirely as they confided to them all their own innocent secrets, hopes and fears, had not been brought up to think they might ask all kinds of inquisitive questions of those older and wiser than themselves upon subjects with which they were not directly concerned. They grew up in the happy confidence that whatever was good for them to know they would be told without any asking, and it had only occurred to Patty during the last few days that the family history was one of those things that had never been talked about.

The children knew a good deal about their mother's childhood. There were many fascinating stories, known by heart, in which the unknown grandfather and uncle played conspicuous parts; but why there had been so little communication of late years between the two houses—why letters to Aunt Hilda or Uncle Marmaduke were so few and far between, and why

there was no interchange of visits between the two families, was one of the puzzles that had been working in Patty's brain for the past five days, and had gradually communicated itself to her shadow, Dolly. Letty was not of an age to be troubled by such conjectures, and the elder sisters had said nothing to her on the subject. They had an idea that sometimes the little one was too outspoken to be an entirely safe confidant.

And on this last evening, as Patty lay in her narrow bed, she could not manage to get off to sleep, though Letty had been slumbering for an hour or more, and Dolly's blue eyes had closed at last, though at first she had been wakeful too. Patty knew that mother always came up during the course of the evening to see if her darlings were all safe, and the little girl thought that she would be able perhaps to sleep after she had received the last kiss from mother's lips.

So when Mrs. Rose came up for a peep at the sleeping children, she found one pair of eyes wide open, and one tumbled head was lifted eagerly at her approach.

'Awake still, Patty dear? That is a bad preparation for to-morrow's journey. Is there anything the matter, little daughter?'

'No, mother; nothing but going away. But it seems as if I *couldn't* get to sleep to-night; I have such lots of thoughts.'

'Thoughts about what? What has my darling got on her mind? Anything mother can put right?'

'I should like to talk to you about it, mother, only I don't want to seem inquisitive. I don't want to ask anything that would be not quite nice for me

to know. Only I can't help my thoughts, can I, mother dear ?'

'Well, it would be rather hard to expect you to have learnt that most difficult of all lessons at your age, little daughter;' and though mother smiled, Patty detected the underlying shadow as of anxiety or sadness in her face. She sat down on the side of the bed, and her child nestled up into her arms.

'I can't think what we shall do when we have no mother near to say things to,' said Patty reflectively. 'It doesn't seem natural for children to go away from their mothers.'

'And what is the special thing that you want to say to-night, my child? You have mother to talk to just one night more.'

'I may say it, mother? You won't mind my asking? You know you need not answer unless you wish.'

Mother mused a few minutes, and then said in her gentlest way :

'If it is something puzzling your little head, dear, I think it would be better that I heard all about it.'

'Oh, thank you, mother dear; it does so help always to talk things over with you. It is about grandfather and Uncle Marmaduke and Aunt Hilda that Dolly and I have been wondering. We do wonder so why they never come here, or ask you to go and see them. You know you have such nice stories about them long ago. Why are there no more now? Why did they all stop such a long time ago? Grandfather is your father, is he not? and Aunt Hilda is your sister? Isn't it funny you never see her? especially when she married your cousin, who was almost like a brother: you know you

always say that Uncle Marmaduke was like a brother to you. What should I do if I never saw Dolly and Letty any more? I should be so miserable!

Mother was smoothing Patty's head all this time with gentle touch. It was some little time before she spoke, and the child waited very patiently, for she was content to wait mother's time, or to go without an answer to her question if mother should think that she was too young to be taken into confidence. It was a relief in itself that she had unbosomed herself of her thought. Now she could rest certain that all would be right, whether or not her natural curiosity was to be relieved.

But when at last the mother spoke, it was not to check the little girl in her impulse of confidence.

'Patty dear,' was the gently spoken reply, 'I had not intended to tell you anything about what is troubling you, but as it has come into your own head, I think it will perhaps be better to let you a little bit into the secret—if secret it can be called. But if I take you into my confidence, dear, I must trust you not to say a word to anybody else.'

'Oh no, mother—indeed I will not. Must I keep it a secret from Dolly, too?'

Mother smiled at the appealing glance which accompanied this timid request, for Dolly was often called in the family circle Patty's 'second self.'

'Well, dearest, you shall tell as much as you please to Dolly—as much as you think she will understand. But I think I would say nothing to Letty. Her tongue wags rather too fast sometimes.'

'I will only tell Dolly—because we have talked about

it together. We didn't say a word to Letty. We don't tell her *quite* everything, you see, because she does not like secrets ; she only likes to know things she can talk to anybody about. She often says so herself—so I don't think it's unkind.'

'No, darling, and it certainly would not do for Letty or anybody else to chatter about what I am going to tell you now. And to begin at the beginning, I suppose I need hardly remind you that father was not always a clergyman, but began life as a soldier.'

'Oh yes, mother dear, of course I know that. I do so like hearing people say that he looks "every inch a soldier" as they so often do—especially when things happen like the fire at Farmer Ryecroft's stack-yard, when father——'

'Yes, yes, darling, we all know how well father can play the part of general when the need for it arises, and how we all love and admire him for it: and yet it was just this very talent that once brought so much trouble to us both.'

'Oh, mother, how could that be?'

'I will try and explain it, Patty. It was just because father was such a good soldier, and seemed to have such a great career before him, that his friends and relatives were so very vexed and angry when he decided to leave the army and become a clergyman. They all thought he was, as they called it, throwing himself away, because if he had gone on as he had begun, he would most likely have won fame and honour and wealth and renown—just the things that are so pleasant, and make people think a great deal of those who win them.'

‘But, mother, hasn’t father done that now? He is a great man, is he not?’

‘Ah, little daughter, that question lies at the root of the whole matter. Father is not a great man in the eyes of the world. He has done nothing since he left his soldiering to win public applause or make men call him great: but perhaps you and I, Patty, would think that he was greater than he would have been if he had all kinds of beautiful decorations, and had won the highest title the world has to give its heroes. For at least the dear father came out victor in a harder fight than he would have ever been called upon to engage in for his queen or country. And we know that better is he who ruleth his own spirit than he that taketh a city.’

‘That is in the Bible,’ said Patty promptly; ‘father took it for his text a little while ago. I don’t think I understood the sermon, but it was a nice one—father’s always are.’

‘Well, Patty, to go on with my little tale: father made up his mind at last that he could do more good as a clergyman than as a soldier, and when once he had so decided, he went steadily on his way, trying to take patiently and bravely the difficulties and troubles that met him. You will not be able to understand what these troubles were; but they came chiefly from the great regret of my family at the step he was taking. My cousin and brother-in-law, Uncle Marmaduke, who had married Aunt Hilda some years after his first wife (whom I never saw) had died, was father’s senior officer in the regiment, and he set himself steadily to combat his decision; and when he found he could not make father change his mind he grew angry, and if father

had not been very patient, there would have been a quarrel. As it was, there was a coolness between them, and this was increased when grandfather's influence and Aunt Hilda's were used in vain. Our relations could not understand that the dear father was doing what he felt to be right, and that his conscience would not let him draw back. It seemed to them that he was ruining what promised to be a very brilliant career, just for a freak or a fancy. It was not wonderful, perhaps, that they thought so, and it was all because they loved him, and thought such great things of him, so you must not think it was meant for unkindness. But it made the difference that you have noticed—it made Aunt Hilda and Uncle Marmaduke and grandfather cease paying us visits. When we came to this quiet little parish, right away from them and the world, they did not care to come and stay in it, and so, for many years, I have only had letters from Aunt Hilda, though we love one another dearly still, and hope some day to meet again. And you see how kind she has been to my little girls, the very first time I have asked her if she could help me out of a difficulty.'

'Then, are they angry any more?'

'No, dear, not angry—all that has passed years ago; only there is a sort of sore feeling left, which you will understand better as you grow older, and which will perhaps teach you a lesson how very careful we ought to be not to let vexed and offended feelings get the mastery over us. They seem such little things when they first come, and they grow to such great proportions, and cast such big shadows—but I am talking over my little daughter's head now. Are you satisfied

with this explanation, Patty? Does it make it a little clearer?’

‘Oh yes, mother dear, I like to understand things; but do you think our cousins will know about it, too?’

‘I do not know, darling; but most likely they will not talk about it if they do, and you will not either. What my little girls have to do is to be very good and gentle, and try to love the kind aunt and uncle who have been so very kind to them, and especially the dear grandfather, whom they have heard so much about.’

‘I should like them all better if they had not been angry with you and father,’ said Patty with a little gentle decision.

‘You must try and put that quite on one side, dearest. I have told you because I should not like you to ask at Aunt Hilda’s house the questions you asked me, and because I trust my little daughter well enough to feel sure she will not cherish unkind or unworthy feelings. And now, darling, it is high time you were asleep, and you must try to put aside all troublesome thoughts for to-night, so that you may shut those wakeful little eyes and wake up quite fresh to-morrow.’

And then Mrs. Rose covered her little daughter up in bed, and kissed her very tenderly, and Patty heard her go round to the other beds and kiss her sisters in like fashion, and in the maze of thoughts that followed—what it would be like to go to sleep without that sweet kiss, and how anyone could be angry with their own idolized father and mother—Patty fell asleep, and only woke to the sunshine of a bright July morning, and the consciousness that to-day the great plunge was to be taken.

CHAPTER III

AT RAVENSTHORPE

‘WHAT a bore last days always are,’ said Hector Tremain, stretching his long limbs, and looking vaguely around as if in search of amusement. ‘I do hate them—a fellow never knows what to be at. And it’s a shame to waste all this lovely weather mewed up in town, when one might be at Tarnside. It seems as if Thursday would never come.’

‘And we might have been going to-morrow if it had not been for those tiresome children, who are to be palmed off upon us. I don’t see the sense of letting other people make your arrangements for you,’ and Hilda shook her handsome mane of curly dark hair, very much as an impatient colt might do.

‘I don’t see the fun of having strange children bothering round at all,’ remarked a third speaker, younger than the other two, who was sitting nose and knees together in a window-seat. ‘I only hope they won’t expect *me* to entertain them—for I just shan’t.’

At that pretty Jessie looked up from her book with a light laugh. Jessie was nearly seventeen, and though still in the schoolroom nominally, was often her mother’s

companion in her walks and drives and in the drawing-room, so that she was regarded by her brothers and sisters almost in the light of a grown-up young lady.

‘Fancy looking for delicate attentions from Judy! They must be benighted beings who would do that after the first few hours of acquaintanceship. Whatever else you may be cut out for, Judy, it is certainly not for the finer social graces.’

Judy’s bright black eyes were fixed reflectively on her sister’s face. She was a dark-browed child not unlike Hilda, only without Hilda’s handsome contours. In the corresponding window-seat, however, sat a boy, her exact counterpart, and so like her that, save for the distinction made by dress, it would have been hard to know one from the other.

This pair, the youngest members of the family, were twins, and had so long gone by the names of Punch and Judy, that the boy’s real name—Percy—was in danger of being forgotten. They were the plagues and pickles of the house, but by no means out of favour on account of their frequent misdemeanours. Indeed, there was an undefined feeling in the family circle that things there would be considerably less lively but for the ever-recurring vagaries of Punch and Judy.

‘As for that,’ said the child reflectively, ‘I don’t know what all that means. I always say just what I think.’

‘You do, indeed, my child; and sometimes a little more.’

‘So does Hilda generally,’ put in Punch, not altogether sure that his playmate was not being criticised unfairly. ‘Hilda hasn’t any of your airs and graces, Jessie, so I don’t see why you need laugh at Judy.’

‘Let her laugh if she likes—I don’t care,’ cried Judy with sturdy independence. ‘I would not be Jessie for something. Of all dull things, I think growing up is the dullest of all. Just fancy not caring to play games, and not being able to tear about, and come in all in a slop. I wish I need never get old. I’d like always to be just as we are now.’

‘Well, you certainly don’t do much in the growing up way,’ said Hector. ‘You are the greatest pair of babies for your age that I ever came across. I dare say these little cousins who are coming to stay with you will be ever so much more grown up. You will have to entertain them, Judy, whether you like it or not. They are girls, you know, and nearer your age than anyone else’s. It will certainly fall to your lot to play with them, and let them join your games. If they had been boys it might have been different; but girls belong to you, without a doubt.’

Judy wrinkled up her brown forehead, and curled up her nose in a grimace indicative of the most profound contempt. She knew that her brother was only teasing her, and she could afford to treat all such insinuations with disdain.

‘I shan’t do anything of the kind. The silly things may just amuse themselves. If they can’t make fun for themselves at Tarnside, they *must* be little geese. I expect they’ll be that, any way—by what one has always heard.’

‘And pray what have you heard?’ asked Hector, who in holiday-time often condescended to be amused by the chatter of his shrewd, observant little sister.

‘Oh, I know they are all a stupid, stick-in-the-mud kind of family. I know it by the way papa talked the other night when we were down at dessert. He said Uncle Rose had just thrown his life away teaching stupid clod-hoppers in the fens. I always listen when papa and grandpapa talk. I think men’s conversation is more interesting than women’s.’

‘Bravo, young ’un. You have some discrimination for your years. Go on in that way of thinking, and you may chance to find yourself popular in society one of these days.’

But Judy curled her lip with great disdain, and shook her head fiercely, as if indignant at such an idea, and slipped off her window-seat to join Punch, who was engaged in some mysterious employment with string and pieces of cork, the object of which was only known to him and his twin.

‘Where is Chi?’ asked Hector, left to his own resources, looking round in vain for occupation and amusement. ‘I never knew such a fellow. He is never to be seen now. What is he up to now, Hilda? You are generally in his secrets.’

‘It’s a jolly secret this time,’ cried the girl, with sparkling eyes. ‘Indeed, I don’t think it is a secret any longer, because it’s just finished now. It *will* be fun having it at Tarnside. Shan’t we have first-rate fun!’ And she rubbed her hands together.

Archibald—or Chi, as he was generally called by his brothers and sisters—was the mechanical genius of the family: and though perhaps the word genius is rather a strong one to use, it was hardly misplaced when applied to him, for his talent at constructive

contrivances was most remarkable, and had won him quite a reputation both at home and at school.

At home he had special advantages for the development of his powers, for his father, proud of the lad's talent, had arranged with a carpenter in the town that his son should have regular instruction at his workshop for a certain number of hours every week. As the baronet was liberal, and allowed the boy as much raw material for his work as he wanted, and never grudged the cost so long as honest workmanship was bestowed upon it, Archibald had a capital time of it, and many were the additions he had made to the fittings of his own room, or the schoolroom, as well as several little clever contrivances that graced his mother's dainty boudoir. But latterly he had been harder at work than had ever been known before, and Hector found it rather dull to be alone with his sisters and the twins from morning to night.

'Oh, he is making something for Tarnside, is he?' said Hector, brightening up. 'I couldn't think what it was kept him eternally at that old workshop. Out with it, Hilda: you might as well tell us what it is. We shall have to know soon now.'

'Yes, it's to be finished to-day, and he's going to get it carted to the railway-station this afternoon, to wait till we go. It's the biggest thing he's made yet, and the cleverest. He did not do it all by himself. He has made a new friend lately—a grown-up gentleman, who is half an engineer too, and they worked at it together. He had built one once before in America, and knew just how it should be done. Chi says he could never have done it alone—nor the men here. But now it's just first-rate.'

‘What is it, then—have you seen it yourself? What is it like? Do tell us.’

The attention of the whole party was now concentrated upon Hilda, and her face was flushed with honest pride, for Chi was her favourite brother, and she took genuine delight in his achievements.

‘Yes, I saw it the other day, when it was nearly done. It’s a double canoe, and Chi and the gentleman both think that it will be able to shoot the rapids from the river into the lake when we get to Tarnside. You know, whenever we try in the punt or the old boat we run aground, or get turned over in the shallows, or something like that; but this thing is almost sure to go straight down. It draws hardly any water, and is as light as can be, and Chi knows how to manage it, because the gentleman gave him some lessons in one that they hired one Saturday afternoon, when they went to Avonminster together to look at the old cathedral buildings.’

‘Bravo, old Chi!’ cried Hector eagerly; ‘I had no notion he was after anything so amusing. A canoe will be no end of fun on the lake. One is tired of the old boats that never go any pace, and pater does not care to get us outriggers, as he says they will not be safe. I wonder what he’ll say to the canoe; but he’ll let us use it now Chi has made it, I don’t doubt.’

‘Oh yes, I’m sure he will. I’m in such a hurry to try it.’

‘I believe I’ll go down to the shop and see it there,’ cried Hector. ‘I’d have gone with them to Avonminster that day if I’d known there was any fun in the wind. But I don’t care for dull old buildings, and I

thought it would be such a bore having lunch at the Palace. The Bishop is jolly enough himself; but somehow the ecclesiastical atmosphere of the house is too much for me. Chi doesn't seem to mind it, and he can always talk about architecture to the old people. I never have a word to say.'

Jessie here looked up, shaking her head.

'You might speak a little more respectfully of the Bishop, I think, Hector, even in the schoolroom. I am very fond of him, and he is always very kind to us.'

But Hector only laughed, and swung himself off to visit his brother at his work. He did not see why he should bother himself to be respectful in his speech about anybody, when there were only his sisters and brothers for audience.

Hilda stood looking out of the window, drumming thoughtfully upon the pane. She seemed lost in thought. Presently she turned round to her sister and said in a low voice:

'Jessie, will *he* be there—at Tarnside, I mean?'

Jessie gave a quick look at her questioner, and then glanced at the twins, who were apparently taking no notice, being entirely engrossed with their own play.

'Yes, of course he will be there—at least, I suppose so. I think he always lives at Tarnside. He has always been there when we have gone other years. Why do you ask?'

'I don't know—I was wondering. It is three years since we were there. I thought perhaps something might have happened in between. It's very odd about him altogether, don't you think so, Jessie?'

Jessie looked as if the subject were distasteful, and glanced round with something of apprehension in her eyes.

‘It always makes me feel creepy. I don’t quite know why, but it does. I wish he were not there. I don’t like to think about him, all alone in that lonely, rambling house. And it is so strange nobody speaks of him, or seems to care for him. I don’t like things that seem mysterious. There is something uncomfortable and unnatural in it.’

‘Yes, I know what you mean; but I think I rather like what seems romantic and out-of-the-way. Only I can’t think why it is all kept so quiet. It would not seem mysterious if people would only talk.’

‘They never do—they never did. Even when we are going to Tarnside, not a word is said.’

‘If I were you, and were such a lot of time with mamma, I should ask about him,’ said Hilda, with her customary decision. ‘I don’t see why we should be treated like children still, and never told a single thing. Have you never said a word?’

‘No, I don’t feel as if I could. I never think about it, except when we are going there. I don’t think papa and mamma can wish us to talk or think about it.’

‘Well, they can’t stop our thinking; and if we think, I don’t know why we shouldn’t talk. I believe I should if I were you.’

‘I don’t think you would. Can’t you see that it is a very painful subject to mamma?’

‘Why to mamma particularly?’

‘Oh, if you don’t understand, I can’t explain,’ said Jessie hastily, with a warning glance in the direction of

the twins. 'Don't bother any more about it, Hilda. I'm sure the less we know or seem to know, the better it will be.'

Hilda was silenced, if not convinced. She said no more, and presently, when Jessie suggested that they should go into the next room and practise their last new duets, she assented without a word. When the twins were thus left alone, they ceased their labours as by common consent, and sat up, looking straight into each other's eyes.

'Did you hear?' said Punch, almost in a whisper.

'Of course I did. They were talking of the ghost at Tarnside.'

Punch drew a little closer, and his dark-skinned face was a trifle paler than was its wont.

'Judy—what is that ghost?'

'I don't know yet; but I mean to find out this time.' The child spoke in the most undaunted way, though her face, too, was a little pale, as if the subject was fraught with some terrors, though probably it was not without its fascination too.

'Judy,' said the other, pressing still closer, 'do you think it is *a real ghost*?'

'No, of course not. I don't believe there *are* such things as real ghosts now, except in books. It's a real live person, of course; but I don't know who; and I mean to find out some more this time. We were silly little children before when we were there. We didn't understand anything. Now I know ever so much more than I did. I shan't be afraid like we used to be.'

Punch looked admiringly at Judy, who in many points was the leading spirit. He could take an active

share in mischief or adventure, but hers was generally the head that planned. She had a remarkably fertile imagination, and was greatly looked up to by her twin.

‘I hope those children won’t be in our way,’ said Punch with an accent of regret in his voice. ‘I wish they weren’t coming. They may spoil all our fun about the ghost if they come prying round too. Don’t you think so?’—for Judy had made a gesture expressive of scornful dissent.

‘I’ll take precious good care they are not in our way; and as for the ghost, if we just drop the least hint about it, the silly little things will be so scared they will never go near the place. Oh, you needn’t be afraid of *them*. They will be poor, silly little ninnies, who won’t be able to say “bo” to a goose. You see if they aren’t.’

CHAPTER IV

UNCLAIMED

THE great express from Lincolnshire came steaming into the big junction station of Avonford, which, as everybody familiar with the neighbourhood knows, is situated at about five miles distant from the cathedral city of Avonminster. Amongst the passengers who alighted at the platform one particularly bright hot Tuesday in July were three little girls, all dressed exactly alike, with almost Quaker-like precision and neatness, who stood together when they had alighted from the steep step of the carriage, each holding a parcel that seemed infinitely precious, whilst they gazed round them with timid appealing glances, as if in search of something that did not appear to be there.

‘What, haven’t your friends sent to meet you, little missies?’ asked the burly, kindly guard, under whose care they had been placed for this strange journey.

‘I don’t know. Nobody seems to be looking for us,’ answered the eldest of the trio. ‘But I shouldn’t know if they were here or not. We’ve never seen any of them before.’

‘Well, very likely their train is late, and they’ll come up soon. It will all come right, and you need not be

afraid. See, there is your big trunk all safe. Just you stand by it till your friends come for you. The people will all clear off when the train moves on, and they can't miss you then. I must go on with it; but you'll be safe there, and somebody will come for you all in good time.'

These were comforting and reassuring words for the three frightened yet self-possessed little maidens, who felt as if they were stranded alone in a perfectly unknown world; but unfortunately they did not seem in the least likely to be fulfilled. The passengers who had come by the train had by this time all moved away. Those who were going on by it were just taking their seats, and exchanging last words with their friends, and still nobody appeared to claim the children, and their hearts began to sink like lead. What should they do if Aunt Hilda had forgotten all about them?

Dolly looked at Patty with eyes that were dilated by anxiety. Letty stood casting sharp glances about her, a good deal of silent indignation mingling with her childish dismay. She felt as if somebody had behaved very unkindly to them in leaving them in this predicament, and she began to evolve a wild but fascinating plan of how they would just take the next train home, and tell the dear, surprised mother that it was evidently no good trying to send them away from her. Everything went wrong from the very beginning.

But perhaps Patty felt it all the most—Patty, the eldest of the three, who was in a measure responsible for the safety of herself and her little sisters. She was really dreadfully frightened as minute after

minute flew by, and still nobody appeared to claim them. And though she said not a word, and held Dolly's little trembling hand in a close grasp as if to reassure her, she did not know what in the world to do next, and began looking vaguely about, as if in search of some kind face whose owner might be appealed to if matters came to a crisis.

As the long train steamed out of the station an elderly gentleman in clerical dress, who had been seeing a friend off, and had been talking to him at the window until this minute, now turned and began leisurely to retrace his steps. The platform was by this time almost entirely deserted, and by far the most noticeable figures upon it now were those of three little girls — quaint morsels of humanity — dressed all exactly alike, in neat brown frocks and little dust-coats, and big hats with nothing but a band of brown ribbon for trimming. Yet, with all the plain homeliness of their attire, there was a refinement about the appearance of the children which betrayed gentle birth if not length of purse. Save that the three heads were on a different level, there seemed nothing to a superficial eye to distinguish one child from another, and all the three looked so quietly self-possessed that they might have been the most experienced travellers in the world. And yet there must have surely been something of an unconsciously appealing character in the look that met him from one pair of big gray-blue eyes, for the old gentleman, as he reached the little trio, paused suddenly, and looking kindly down at the children, said:

'And is there nobody at liberty to look after you, my

dears? Have you been travelling by this train? Did you expect somebody to be here to meet you?’

Now it seems rather a strange thing, but it is nevertheless true that kindness at a critical moment does more to bring tears to the eyes of little people (and big ones, too, sometimes) than the trouble itself has done. And so it was now—for Patty, who had been so brave and quietly composed during these trying moments, now felt her throat swell, and her lip begin to quiver, whilst Dolly’s eyes fairly brimmed over, and it was Letty who alone found voice to make any answer to the kind old gentleman who had come to their assistance.

‘Please, it was settled that Aunt Hilda, or somebody belonging to her, was to be here to meet us after we got out of the train. We are going away with her to a house somewhere a long way off. And she isn’t here, and nobody isn’t either, and we don’t know what to do. And *I* think we had better go straight home to father and mother again—don’t you?’

Three little faces, two of which bore traces of tears, were raised so appealingly to the good old man, that he could not restrain a smile, though his heart was moved.

‘Tut, tut, my dears, don’t cry about it; we will see that you get safe to your friends. If there has been some mistake it shall be put to rights without any catastrophe. Let me see who my little new acquaintances are;’ and stooping down, he read the name upon the label on their big trunk. When he looked up again his face was smiling more than before.

‘What, three little rosebuds going a-begging like

this? That will never do, will it? Suppose I carry you off to my garden and plant you all there? I am a great man for roses, and I am just wanting some new varieties. Say, how would you like that?’

Patty and Dolly hung back, half shy, half laughing: but Letty boldly slipped her small hand into the friendly one held out, and said, ‘I’ll go with you. I think you’re much nicer than Aunt Hilda. We never did want to go there.’

‘And can you tell me Aunt Hilda’s name?’ asked their new friend, much entertained.

‘On letters and things she’s called Lady Tremain, and uncle is called Sir Marmaduke, and grandfather is Mr. Marshall, Esq.,’ was the ready answer. ‘Our mother and Aunt Hilda are sisters: but we’ve never seen them before.’

‘Oh, indeed; then, my dears, I know all about your relations, though I have not had the pleasure of meeting you before. Come along with me, and we will soon see if we cannot find out something to explain the mistake that has been made.’

Still holding Letty’s hand, their new friend led them towards the main building of the station, and the little girl, taking stock of him as she had not done before, scanned him from head to foot with her sharp eyes, and then turned back towards her sisters to say, in a very audible aside:

‘Do look at his legs—I’m sure he is a Bishop.’

‘And pray, what do you know about Bishops, young lady?’ asked their protector, his sides shaking with laughter: and Letty put on rather a grand little air as she answered:

'Of course we know about Bishops. Ours comes to stop a whole night with us when we have confirmations. He is very fond of father, and he is very kind to us all. He has legs just like yours, and a nice curly-up hat. I think Bishops are always kind and nice. Ours is, and so are you. I like Bishops.'

The last words were spoken with characteristic energy and decision, and provoked another smile from the good Bishop of Avonminster.

'Well, my dear, I think after that we ought to be friends. So your father is a clergyman, is he?'

'Yes, the best clergyman in the world—at least, we think so, and so do all the people in the parish. We have a very nice parish. It's in the fens. Do Bishops have parishes, too?'

But before there was time for an answer to this question, the station-master was seen approaching with a respectful salutation, to see if he could do anything for his lordship.

'Are you expecting Sir Marmaduke Tremain's family through the place to-day, station-master?' asked the Bishop. 'I think they generally bespeak a separate carriage from the junction when they take their long journey north, do they not?'

'Yes, my lord; but they do not travel till Thursday. There is a saloon carriage ordered for that day, to go by the noon express to the north. Did you expect to see them here to-day?'

'These children did, it seems. They are little relations, and are going down to Cumberland with them; but there has evidently been some mistake.'

'Yes, my lord; Sir Marmaduke's party does not

travel till the day after to-morrow. Shall I telegraph that the young ladies are here, and send them on by the next train ?'

The Bishop stood still, considering.

'It is rather a tedious, awkward journey, from here to Ravensthorpe, is it not ?'

'Well, my lord, it is ; although it is not more than a matter of five-and-twenty miles ; but there is another change, and the trains do not fit very well. Still, I would take care that the young ladies should go safely. Or I would telegraph to Lady Tremain for instructions about them.'

The children stood listening anxiously whilst their fate was thus under discussion. The Bishop turned to them, and said :

'My dears, would you be willing to come home with me, and stay at my house till Thursday, when you can join your aunt's party as arranged ? I think that would be a better plan than to take them by surprise to-day, just when the house will be in a bustle, and everybody busy with preparations for a long journey and a long stay in another place. I know your grandfather and uncle and aunt very well, and I am sure they would trust me to take care of you for a day or two. So if you think that you can be happy at my house, we will go there at once. My wife will be very pleased to see you, and will try to make you happy. Say, little rosebuds, will you come with me ?'

'Oh yes, please,' cried Letty, almost jumping with joy ; 'I should like to stay with you all the time, and never go to Aunt Hilda's at all.'

And the elder little sisters having expressed their

grateful assent in a less outspoken way, the kind Bishop led his little friends out of the station, to the spot where his carriage was waiting for him, a porter following, wheeling the big trunk, which was hoisted on to the basket that surmounted the comfortable-looking brougham.

The tears were quite forgotten by this time, and the little sisters exchanged glances of delighted congratulation as they realized what was going to happen. From having lived so much with grown-up people, and from knowing so little of young companions, it had been rather a terrible thought, that of facing a number of unknown cousins, in addition to aunt, uncle, and grandfather. But this sudden journey to a Bishop's house did not seem at all terrible, and they began to feel that they were fairly launched in a new world of adventure, not by any means without its attractions.

To sit in a grand, cushioned carriage, drawn by two sleek horses, was in itself a charming novelty, and Letty openly expressed a hope that the drive was going to be a very long one.

'It is six miles from Avonford to Avonminster, where I live,' answered the Bishop, smiling.

'Six miles seems a long way to be from a station,' remarked Patty, with sedate gravity. 'We are only four, but that is sometimes rather inconvenient.'

The Bishop laughed.

'Oh, we have a station of our own at Avonminster, but the best trains do not stop at it, so we often drive out to the junction. Your uncle's house is in the next town; in a place called Ravensthorpe, as I dare say you know. It used to be quite in the country when I

knew it first, and now there is a fine town all round him, though his house is still surrounded by nice grounds and gardens. Have you never been to see it?’

‘No, never,’ answered Letty. ‘You see, we are too busy in the parish to go visiting often. I don’t know now how they will do without us; but father and mother sent us away because the fever had come. I think it would have been better for us to stay, because we could have helped to see after the poor sick people; but they wouldn’t let us. It’s very hard to be sent away just when there is so much to be done;’ and Letty heaved a big sigh.

The Bishop seemed interested, and asked the children a great many questions about their home and their parents, and the parish that was such an object of pride and delight. Once started on this familiar and beloved theme, the little tongues wagged fast enough, and before the six miles were accomplished, their new friend had arrived at a very considerable amount of knowledge respecting the past lives of his three little ‘rosebuds.’

When the carriage was passing through the streets of Avonminster, the children ceased chattering, and gazed out of the window. First they passed through a wretched-looking quarter down by the river, which quite shocked Letty by its squalid and miserable appearance; but presently the character of the town improved, the streets grew broad and fine, and there were grand-looking shop-windows, and beyond them rows of fine houses, some of which had bright gardens in front of them. Last of all they came to beautiful buildings that wore a look of much greater antiquity,

and the Bishop told them they were getting near to the cathedral and his house.

‘Is your house called a palace?’ asked Patty; ‘and is it near the cathedral? I thought Bishops generally lived a good way off from their cathedrals.’

‘They often do, my dear, but I live close to mine. Sometimes the palace is many miles away, but occasionally it is in the Close itself, as in this case. I live quite under the shadow of the great cathedral.’

‘Do you like it?’ asked Letty; ‘I think I should like it very much. I think it would help to make one feel good; but then Bishops always are good, of course.’

There was something in the Bishop’s smile that the child did not quite understand; but he answered quietly:

‘I like it very much, my dear; very much indeed.’

And just then the carriage turned in under a great archway, and the children gazed about them in wonder and admiration, for they saw a very grand and beautiful sight, which, young as they were, they still were able in part to appreciate.

They found themselves in a great quadrangle, the centre of which was occupied by a large expanse of close-shaven turf, that looked like emerald velvet. Round this beautiful green square ran a wide, well-kept gravel road, and then came the buildings themselves, grand hoary structures hundreds of years old, with fine mullioned windows, exquisite tracery, massive buttresses, and architectural adornments of almost every century, all blended together into one harmonious whole, marvellously beautiful and complete in its picturesque

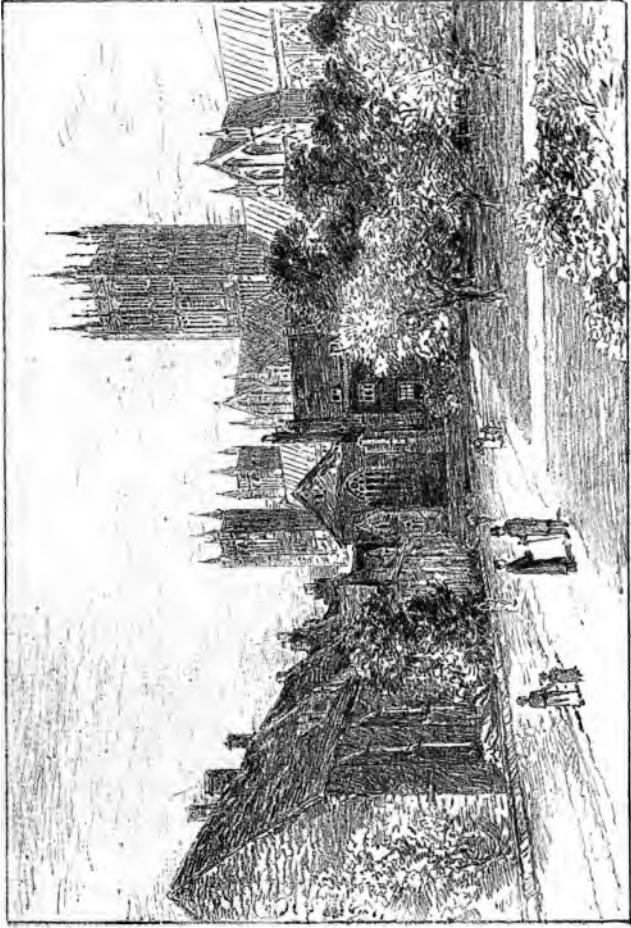
antiquity; its old walls draped with graceful flowering creepers, or clad in close-clinging ivy, almost as old as the masonry it covered. And one side of this quadrangle was formed by the cathedral itself—the wonderful, beautiful structure towering high into the sunny blue of the summer sky, as if pointing the way upwards to those who were yet in the shadow below. It needed not that the spectator should have knowledge to appreciate its many architectural beauties, or to estimate the value of its priceless glass. There was something in its stately magnificence and solemn grandeur that compelled admiration, and inspired with a species of instinctive reverence even the most light-minded and careless.

As the little sisters alighted from the carriage, and stood gazing up at the wonderful building, rearing its stately head high above them, there was a sort of awe on each little face, and the good Bishop glanced at them, and smiled to himself as if well pleased.

‘Now, my dears, suppose you come with me. You shall go to evensong in the cathedral if you like. But I must introduce you now to my wife. She will be wondering who in the world I have got here.’

And the Bishop glanced up towards a little arched window that overlooked the Close, and there he and his little companions saw a sweet-faced old lady, in a lace cap, who, as Letty afterwards observed, ‘looked just the right sort of wife for a Bishop.’

It almost seemed to the children as if they were going into the very cathedral itself, for there was a little cloistered walk leading up to the door, and when they stood inside the hall, it seemed like part of a



THE CLOSE AT AVONMINSTER.

beautiful old church, with its stained glass windows, tessellated pavement, and great vaulted roof. The beauty and solemnity of everything awed the little girls; but it pleased them at the same time, and there was no real fear in their hearts, only a sort of tremulous happiness that was a strange and not unpleasing experience. And when their eyes had grown used to the subdued light in the big place, they saw that there was a wide oak staircase projecting into the hall, and that a gallery ran most of the way round it. And about half-way up the stairs stood the old lady whom they had seen before at the window.

The Bishop went forward and spoke to her for a few moments in a low tone, and then she came down the staircase, and held out her hands to her little guests, with the sweetest of smiles upon her face.

‘Poor little darlings; and did nobody come to meet them? Well, we must see what we can do amongst us to make up for auntie’s mistake.’

And then she kissed the three upturned faces in the kindest and tenderest way, and taking Letty’s hand in hers, led her and her sisters up the wide shallow steps, and down a long corridor, and up and down several more funny little flights of stairs, until she opened the door of a big, low room, which had three little beds in it side by side, just like their own bedroom at home.

‘Oh,’ cried Letty, ‘how nice—how funny! Is this the room where your little girls sleep? Won’t they be vexed if they find us here?’

The Bishop’s wife looked down at the innocent questioner with a smile that had some sadness in it.

‘I have no little girls or boys of my own, dear; but

I often have some little nieces or nephews staying with me, and this is the room I give to them. It will just do for you, will it not? You will feel happier and more at home all together, I know. See, you can take off your hats and cloaks and hang them here, and I will send the maid with some hot water, and she shall unpack such things as you will want for two days. And when you are ready, come downstairs, and you shall have lunch with us. I dare say you have had nothing to eat for hours, you poor little dears.'

And, with another kind smile and kiss, the Bishop's wife left them, and the children stood looking at one another in a sort of happy and bewildered maze.

CHAPTER V

AT AVONMINSTER

‘WELL,’ said Letty, drawing a deep breath, ‘I do think it must be very nice to be a Bishop. And if one can’t be one, the next nicest thing is to stay in a Bishop’s house.’

It was towards evening that the child delivered herself of this remark. The strange day—which seemed about six times as long as any ordinary day—was drawing at last to its conclusion, and the children had come into the drawing-room to say good-night, after having spent a delightful hour in the Bishop’s garden amongst his roses, that were almost all in bloom. The rose-garden had been by no means the only pleasure they had enjoyed that afternoon, for they had been to the cathedral for the short evensong, and had heard the grand tones of the organ rolling above their heads through the echoing arches, and the sweet, clear voices of the white-robed choir boys. It was a new experience to them, and one that they greatly enjoyed, for they were accustomed to go to church several times during the week, and a service was a pleasure rather than a source of weariness to them; but the grandeur and beauty and sense of boundless space were new, as

was also the perfect music and accurate chanting. In their own little parish church at home, the best was done that could be to make the service attractive and harmonious; but it was working against great difficulties there, so that the three little sisters had never realized before what a beautiful thing a simple choral service could be.

‘It makes me feel good to be here,’ added Dolly, with perfect simplicity. ‘I do wish father and mother could see it all, too. They would so enjoy it.’

‘I wish we could tell them all about it,’ said Patty with a sigh. ‘But letters are *so* slow and stupid, and it will be *such* a long time before we see them again.’

‘I am *so glad* somebody made a mistake about that train, or the day, or something,’ added Letty, who was by this time perched on the Bishop’s knee; ‘because, you see, if it hadn’t been for that, we might never have got to know you.’

‘Father and mother will be so interested to hear about it all,’ said Patty. ‘They will be so very much obliged to you for being so very kind.’

‘I wish they were here now,’ quoth Dolly, with a little irrepressible sigh, not without its unconscious pathos; ‘it does seem so strange to be going to bed without mother to come and kiss us.’

‘And without father to say “God bless you,”’ chimed in Letty. ‘We never had to do without that before. I hope’—and here the little face put on a look of quick gravity and seriousness—‘that God *will* bless us just the same. Do you think He will?’ and the earnest eyes were raised to the Bishop’s face.

‘I am sure of it, my child. if you crave His blessing,’

was the tenderly spoken reply ; ‘and your parents will pray for their darlings, even though they are far away to-night. So, my little girl, you have learned to value God’s blessing already, have you ? May He keep you always in that same state of mind !’

‘I’m not quite sure if I understand what it is, quite,’ answered Letty, who was always transparently sincere ; ‘but I know it is a good thing, and that we cannot do without it.’

‘It keeps us safe,’ said Patty.

‘And helps us to be good,’ added Dolly.

‘I should think God blessed this house very often,’ exclaimed Letty, after a thoughtful pause of consideration ; ‘it *feels* as if He did.’

‘It’s a Bishop’s house, you see,’ Patty added ; ‘and in one place in the Bible bishops are called angels. I suppose that was because they were so very good.’

And when, after a little more talk, the children went to bed, the good Bishop laid his hands on each smooth head, and pronounced a blessing on it. So the little ones went happy to their nest, made happier still by a promise from the Bishop’s wife that she would visit them presently with a good-night kiss, and when they had all gone the husband and wife turned to each other with something between a smile and a sigh, and presently the Bishop said :

‘Well, they may be an instrument, under Providence, to do a work for God in the house where they are going.’

‘They are dear little things,’ said Mrs. Ellersley, the Bishop’s wife. ‘I suppose they are the children of that other daughter of Mr. Marshall, who offended him

in some way, and has been more or less cut off from her family since. Perhaps the coming of these quaint little children will be the means of healing the breach.'

'Very possibly. I have gathered from one thing and another that Lady Tremain has always much regretted it; but she is too much occupied, and has too much always on her hands to attempt a piece of diplomatic negotiation. I should like to feel that some gentler element would mingle with the wilder and more passionate tempers of that family. They are fine, high-spirited young things; but there is a spirit of self-will and insubordination at work in one and all, which is not kept in check as it should be in their education either at home or abroad. Their naturally fine dispositions and generous impulses have so far hindered any outbreak of a serious nature; but with the sad example before the parents' eyes of what that untamed spirit of self-will may lead to, I do sometimes wonder that so little is done to warn or guide, or control a like disposition in these handsome, hot-headed boys and girls.'

Mrs. Ellersley looked very grave, and an expression of sadness stole over her face.

'Ah, yes, indeed, it is most sad. I suppose things in *that* quarter are no nearer a happy consummation than they ever were?'

'I fear not; but the subject is so painful a one that it is hardly ever named. Indeed, I think it would be less painful if there were less mystery observed about it; but the whole thing is so full of difficulty and sadness to all concerned that it is not for strangers, or even old friends, to intermeddle. I am glad that they are

going to Tarnside again at last. That at least is one step gained, and looks as if there might be a certain amount of improvement. But it is just possible that *he* may not be there. His determination to seclude himself was always one of the greatest difficulties and complications. It is specially sad for poor Lady Tremain.'

'Yes, indeed. I have always felt much for her, though she bears it exceedingly well. Well, I hope with you that something may be accomplished this summer. I should not be altogether surprised if our three little visitors helped to smooth matters down in more ways than one. Their perfect simplicity and guilelessness will stand them in good stead, and to my thinking there is something very irresistible in their quaint little words and ways. Old-fashioned children are quite going by in these days of hurry and forcing. It is quite refreshing to meet them now and again. I feel I should like to make the acquaintance of "father and mother," too. I am sure they must be people worth knowing.'

'I have thought that myself,' answered the Bishop, with a smile. 'Well, perhaps one of these days we may have that satisfaction.'

The next day was a very happy one for the little guests at the Palace. First came an early nursery breakfast, and then a sort of service, in lieu of family prayers, in a beautiful little chapel that opened from a long passage beyond the hall. Then, whilst the Bishop and Mrs. Ellersley and the chaplain had breakfast, the little girls were told they might play about in the garden, and presently the chaplain, who was called

Mr. Lewin, came out and had a romp with them, which they enjoyed very much. Mr. Lewin was a young man, and was related to the Bishop, and so he was quite at home in the Palace, and he took his little new friends into the vinery, and gave them some grapes, and showed them such wonderful flowers and orchids growing in the hot-houses and green-houses, that the children quite felt as if they had been in fairyland.

Presently a message was brought out that Mrs. Ellersley was going into the town, and that the young ladies might go with her if they liked. So the eager little maidens ran indoors to get their hats and capes and gloves, and soon were walking out of the archway full of curiosity as to what they were going to see. Letty held Mrs. Ellersley's hand, and danced along at her side as though her little feet had springs inside them. The elder pair walked hand-in-hand in front, more soberly, it is true, but with just as much pleasure and interest. The shop windows were most fascinating to the country-bred children, who had hardly ever been in a large town before. And as Mrs. Ellersley had to go into a great many during her walk, they had ample time and opportunity to satisfy their curiosity by feasting their eyes on the wonderful things exposed for sale.

Presently, as they were turning homewards, they encountered the Bishop himself, coming leisurely down the wide, sunny street, returning the many respectful salutations made to him with an easy genial courtesy. As soon as Letty saw him she darted off with characteristic eagerness to meet him, and returned to the rest of the party hanging on to his hand, and

chattering at the top of her voice. Mrs. Ellersley was inside a large book shop, and the other little girls were amusing themselves by looking in at the attractive window.

‘Well, but don’t you think only looking is rather poor fun?’ the Bishop was saying, as he came up. ‘I don’t think it would quite have satisfied me when I was a boy. What do you say to carrying off a remembrance each from Avonminster?’

Letty’s face fairly beamed, whilst those of the elder pair crimsoned from brow to chin with a mingling of delight and shy embarrassment. These little people were so unaccustomed to receiving presents, that both the delight and the diffidence were heightened in proportion, though Letty was too young to feel much of the latter.

‘Come, come,’ laughed the kind Bishop, as he saw the glowing cheeks, ‘you do not mind taking a present from an old friend of your grandfather’s? There, I thought not. That is right. And now you must all set to work to choose what you would like best. Shall it be something to read, or something to eat, or something to play with? See, we have plenty of choice before us. I will give you five minutes to make up your minds, whilst I go in here to pay a bill. When I come out I shall want an answer. I have to be at a meeting in half an hour, so we shall have to make our purchases quickly.’

The Bishop disappeared then into a neighbouring shop, and the excited children were left to their own counsels. When their kind friend came out in a few minutes’ time, he found them all clustered together

before a big linendrapery store, engaged in earnest confabulation under their breath. It was about the last shop he would have expected to attract them, and wondered if, after all, despite their Quaker-like plainness of attire, they were at heart true daughters of Eve. Smiling to himself as the idea suggested itself, he crossed over the road, and laid a hand on the shoulder of the nearest child.

‘Well, is it to be new bonnets, or sashes, or frocks? Come, you must let me into the secret of all these grave looks. What have you set your little hearts upon? Is it that bottle-green hat as tall as the great pyramid, with feathers enough to stock a whole poultry-yard, eh?’

Letty went off into a little shriek of laughter, and, taking the Bishop’s hand between both of hers, she said:

‘I think mother *would* laugh at us if she saw us in a thing like that. She would call us three little Guy Fawkeses, just ready for the fifth of November. No, we were wondering if you would mind if we had some of that nice warm flannel on that roll. Patty says she is almost sure it is good, and it *would* be so nice to have a roll of it for our very own.’

The Bishop looked both amused and puzzled.

‘But, my dears, what in the world do you want flannel for—and in this hot weather too? What could you do with it if you had it?’

‘Oh, send it to mother for the parish,’ answered three little voices in chorus; and Patty added by herself:

‘You can’t think how useful flannel always seems when people are ill. And there are lots ill at home by

this time, I am almost sure—men and women and little children too. And you know we have so few people to help in our parish—and I know the flannel would be *such* a help to mother. Please do you mind? For it would be so much nicer to send something to help father and mother in the parish than to have toys for ourselves, though it was so very kind of you to think of it.'

The Bishop looked down into the earnest, pleading, upturned faces before him, and his own wore a very softened look.

'Are you all agreed about it—do you all want your own present sent to the parish, instead of enjoying it yourselves?'

'Oh, but we shall enjoy it ourselves—we shall enjoy it in mother's letters,' cried Letty; 'and if Dolly and Patty have flannel, may I have things in tins that make soup and beef-tea for the people who are getting better? It would help mother ever such a lot if she had some tins. For you see it takes a lot of time to make nice soup, and often when people are ill it is wanted in such a hurry. We have seen a great deal of illness in our parish at one time or another, and we *do* know what things are wanted most.'

'So it seems,' answered the Bishop, and forthwith he led the way into the linendraper's shop.

Then for five or six entrancing minutes the children sat beside the counter, and heard such orders given as quite took their breath away. So many yards of the flannel they had pointed out, so many blankets, so many pairs of ready-made sheets, so many flannel and knitted jackets, so many shawls and comforters. And

when the shopman had made a note of the numbers of things selected, the Bishop said :

‘ And send the goods off this afternoon to Mrs. Rose. Now, children, you must supply the address : and just wait to fasten up the parcel till I send down from my house a bundle of old linen and a note.’ And the children exchanged sparkling glances, whilst Letty murmured audibly :

‘ He *must* have had a parish himself once—he knows so well what is wanted.’

But the shopping was not all done yet, for next they were taken across the road to a great grocer’s shop, and there another wonderful order was given, of tinned soups, and all manner of stores that are so urgently needed when there is sickness raging in many homes, and few are there to do the work of tending the sick. Patty hardly knew whether to laugh or to cry, as she heard the Bishop’s directions, and pictured the wondering astonishment of her parents when these great parcels came to be delivered at the Rectory. But Letty was in a fever of delight, and had so much to say to the shopman and to the Bishop—for this seemed to her especially her concern—that it was only with difficulty their kind friend escaped in time to be punctual at his meeting.

What a great deal there was to tell Mrs. Ellersley when they joined her again, and how kindly she sympathized with their delight ! It was altogether the most wonderful morning, and the children had certainly known nothing like it in the course of their whole previous experience.

Then after their dinner, which they took with the grown-up people’s lunch, the Bishop called them into

his study, and helped them to compose the letter that was to be sent with the parcel.

This was a very entrancing occupation, and took quite a long time, because, as Letty kept saying, 'There was not half enough about the Bishop in it, and he did not always put in her sentences just as she said them, but changed about the words so that 'no one would guess by reading it what a nice Bishop he was.'

However, as a whole, the result was almost satisfactory, and at least the letter contained an account of the adventure at the railway-station, and the visit to the Bishop's Palace which had resulted from it.

'Father and mother *will* be surprised when it comes,' was the burden of the children's thoughts and words; and that night, when Mrs. Ellersley went up to visit the three little girls in their white beds, a voice from one of them was saying, with great energy :

'It is such a real comfort to feel that the parish is provided for. I shan't mind staying away half so much as I did.'

'And if we were only going to stay here all the time,' rejoined another soft voice, 'I should hardly mind it a bit.'

'There is something very nice about a Bishop and a Bishop's house,' added the third; 'I always did think so, and now I know it. I'm glad now I was christened by a Bishop, though I used to think I would have liked it better if father had done it, as he did you two. I don't want to go to Aunt Hilda's to-morrow. I should like to stay here till we can go home, and then for father and mother to come and fetch us, and see our nice kind Bishop, and Mrs. Bishop, too.'

CHAPTER VI

A TROOP OF COUSINS

‘GOOD-DAY, sir.’

‘Good-day, my lord. I am sure we are greatly beholden to you for coming so promptly to the aid of these damsels in distress.’

‘Pray don’t name it. I have enjoyed the office of knight-errant mightily, I can tell you. What, must I perform the introduction to your own flesh and blood? Children, do you know that this is your grandfather?’

The little group was standing on the platform of the great junction station at Avonford. The Bishop and his young charges had been waiting there some minutes before he saw the familiar face of his old friend, and hailed him with a greeting.

The children raised their eyes, and saw before them an old gentleman dressed in an old-fashioned way, in a long brown coat and a big silk stock. He carried in his hand a heavy gold-headed cane, and his hat was drawn low over a pair of very bushy white eyebrows, under which sparkled eyes so keen and bright that the children shrank a little beneath their intense gaze.

‘Well, so here you all are—and a fine dance you would have led somebody, if you hadn’t fallen on your

feet, as kittens always do, I suppose, eh? Well, you don't look manifestly worse for the adventure. The air of the Palace agrees with most of its guests, I fancy.'

The children made no reply. They had very little idea what was meant by the short sentences jerked out, which seemed to be addressed more to the Bishop than to them. They advanced in turn, and held out a timid hand, retiring again towards their first friend, as if dreading the moment when they must leave him, as was indeed the case.

The grandfather seemed to note this, for he said in his grimly humorous way :

'It strikes me, Bishop, that you are more cut out than I for the rôle of affectionate grandparent. Grandchildren are a little too thick on the field at home for me to display any extraordinary enthusiasm over a new importation. What do you say to changing parts in earnest?'

The good Bishop laughed.

'At least, when you are tired of your rosebuds, there will always be a welcome for them at Avonminster. I mean to claim them once again before they go back to their fens and their parish duties. You are to be congratulated, Marshall, whether you admit it or not, on the possession of these grandchildren, and still more on your close kinship with those who have made them what they are.'

These words, which were spoken with a good deal of quiet seriousness, did not reach the ears of the children, nor were they intended to do so. The little ones saw, however, that a sort of cloud seemed to pass over grandfather's face, that he stuck out his lower lip, and

turned once more upon them one of those formidable glances that were rather terrible to see. They wondered if he were angry; but there was no way of finding that out, and in the sorrow of saying good-bye to their kind friend the Bishop, all else was forgotten. They each received a kind kiss and blessing, and out of some capacious pockets came three parcels, neatly done up in paper, which their host put into their hands at parting.

‘For the little girls who put the parish before their own pleasure, and wanted nothing for themselves,’ was the kindly spoken sentence that accompanied the gift, and then the Bishop turned away without waiting to be thanked.

‘You won’t come and see Hilda?’ said the grandfather.

‘Not to-day. A station is no place for meetings, and Lady Tremain will have her hands and mind full. I wish you all a very happy and prosperous journey, and a safe return. I shall see you all again when you get back to Ravensthorpe. Have you settled, by-the-bye, when that will be?’

‘I hardly know—in a couple of months perhaps. So much depends on weather and so forth. My kind remembrances to Mrs. Ellersley.’

With a salutation on both sides, the two gentlemen parted, and the three little girls felt very strange and lonely as they saw the tall figure of the Bishop disappear in the crowd. But they were called by their grandfather to follow him, and turning round to obey, they found that he had been joined by a tall lad with a pleasant open face, who was regarding them curiously.

‘Well, to be sure, you are little queers!—you look for all the world as if you had come out of the ark,’ was the frank yet not unkindly greeting of this new cousin, who was introduced, as it were, by the grandfather with a wave of the hand, and a few indistinctly heard words. ‘How d’ye do, all of you? You’d best come along with me. Our carriage is over there, and the mater is getting in a stew to have us all collected together under her eye. So you have kept us baking here two whole days, whilst you went larking round at the old Bishop’s Palace. You’re artful little wretches, I can see, for all you look so demure.’

The three children exchanged wondering glances as they followed this queer big boy in silence and bewilderment. They had never heard such strange words and expressions before, and it perplexed them to know what he meant by them. They were fairly launched now on the tide of the new life, and just let themselves be carried along without any active volition on their own part.

‘Here they are—three little oddities—fresh from the fens,’ cried their conductor at last, as they approached a very fine-looking railway carriage, out of the window of which another big boy was leaning; and at the sound of those words, a lady descended from the carriage, and the children found themselves being kindly kissed and welcomed by Aunt Hilda.

The first thing that struck them was that Aunt Hilda was not in the least like mother. For one thing, she was more beautifully dressed for a journey than mother ever was even on state occasions. The delicate gray merino fell in graceful folds round her tall figure, and

the bonnet, and gloves, and cloak, all of the same tint, and the rosebud nestled up in some delicate lace at her throat, produced such an effect of harmony and style that the children were awed and impressed—they hardly knew why—and felt that their aunt was a very grand lady altogether, and hardly knew what to say to her.

But there was not much need for talking just then. The energies and attention of the party were all occupied in getting settled and collected before the start that was now close at hand. The children were lifted into the carriage by the tall boys, very much as if they were part of the necessary bag and baggage, and though they received a good many greetings and some kisses from the many people inside that wonderful carriage, no one had leisure or attention to spare for them, and they were able to get away into a quiet corner together, and sit down on a sofa, and look about them without fear of attracting attention or remark.

One thing that impressed them most at the outset was the luxury of the big saloon carriage, which was quite a novelty to them.

It seemed so strange to see sofas and arm-chairs in a railway carriage that it required quite a stretch of imagination to believe themselves there at all.

And then the people: what a lot there seemed to be; it really was confusing to see all the strange faces, and to realize that they all belonged to relations. There was grandfather and Aunt Hilda whom they knew, whilst the fine, tall, soldier-like man who got in later must surely be Uncle Marmaduke: but the cousins seemed endless, though there were only six in reality,

but one or two comrades had assembled to see them off, and it was not possible to distinguish amongst them all at once.

But presently came a dividing of forces, and a scattering right and left as the ticket inspector came along, and the carriages were all locked up. Next followed the shrill whistle of the engine, and with a sigh of relief the elder members of the party settled themselves in their places, glad that the bustle and confusion were over.

Then it was that the six cousins began to look with more of curiosity and attention at the little strangers clustered together in the corner. They had rather the aspect of homely brown sparrows, accidentally imprisoned in an aviary of bright-plumaged birds.

Presently the youngest of the three girls advanced slowly upon them, and stood facing them with a look of extreme gravity on her dark, gipsy-like face.

‘So you are our cousins, are you?’ she said. ‘How do you all do?’

‘We are very well, thank you,’ answered all the three in a breath.

‘And how old are you?’ was the next question.

‘I am eleven,’ said Patty.

‘I am ten,’ said Dolly.

‘I shall be nine next month,’ said Letty; and then a look of dismay crossed her face, for she realized for the first time the possibility of having to spend a birthday away from home.

‘We are twelve, Punch and I,’ resumed Judy, giving information as frankly as she asked it. ‘Punch and I are twins, and I am called Judy. Punch hasn’t been

to school yet, because I should miss him so—to boarding-school, I mean, like the other boys; we both go to school in the town. I suppose you have none of you ever been to school?’

‘No, never; father and mother always give us our lessons.’

‘I thought as much by the cut of your jibs;’ and then Judy laughed, and the little sisters exchanged wondering glances.

‘Chi says you have all come out of the ark, and that Mrs. Noah cut out your frocks for you. It was Chi who brought you to the carriage. He’s jolly; I like him better than Hector, and he’s cleverer, too. He’s just made a canoe of his own. It’s in the van behind. We’re going to do a lot of jolly things with it at Tarn-side. I suppose you never had any brothers either?’

‘No, never.’

‘How awfully dull it must be!’

‘What?’

‘Why, not having brothers or going to school, or any of the things that make excitement and fun. Do you often have larks of your own? You don’t look like it.’

‘We are very happy, thank you,’ answered Patty, by no means certain that this was an answer to the question.

‘But you live in a very dead-alive place, don’t you?’

‘It’s a very nice place,’ asserted Letty, metaphorically ruffling up her feathers; ‘I don’t know what you mean by “dead-alive.” We don’t have anything nasty like that with us.’

Judy laughed good-humouredly.

‘That’s right, little ’un! stick up for your own

opinions; it's much the best way always. Can't help wondering how you amuse yourselves, all the same.'

'There is the parish,' said Dolly simply; 'we are very busy. We are too old to want to be amused all day like children.'

'It is much nicer helping mother, and having sensible things to do,' added Letty, whilst Patty said reflectively:

'We do play games of our own, and enjoy them very much, only we have other things to do beside.'

'Oh, Jerusalem!' exclaimed another voice just behind, and Punch's mischievous face looked over the back of the sofa. 'Oh, my! aren't they a rum lot, just!'

'I wish you would speak English,' said Letty, plucking up her courage. 'I can't understand half the things you say.'

This rebuke, spoken in clear tones, reached the ears of Uncle Marmaduke, and evoked a hearty laugh from him.

'Bravo, my little girl, I am very glad to hear you say so. Don't be afraid of pulling up these big boys of mine when they talk their schoolboy jargon, which they call slang, and which I call arrant and hideous nonsense. I am very glad you do not understand it. I wish my own girls did not. As for Judy there, she is every bit as bad as the boys herself. If she does not amend her ways before she grows a little older, I shall send her away somewhere where she will never see a boy from one year's end to another.'

Letty shrank a little into herself at thus being made an object of public attention, and Judy's dark face crimsoned over, though she only laughed. Her father,

having said his say, subsided behind his paper again, and the children dropped their voices to a lower key.

‘What have you got in those parcels?’ asked the ever-curious Judy. ‘Something to eat?’

‘I don’t know, but I don’t think so. The Bishop gave them to us when he said good-bye.’

‘Aren’t you going to open them and see?’

The children would rather have postponed this pleasure till they could have enjoyed it in peace alone together, but they thought it might perhaps be selfish or ill-natured to say so, and besides, they *did* want to see what the packets contained, so after a little hesitation they undid the strings, and opened the layers of soft paper that hid the objects enclosed from view.

‘How slow you are! why can’t you cut the strings?’ cried the impatient Judy. ‘I should have done it in half the time. How they are wrapped up! I wonder what they are; but if the Bishop gave them they are sure to be nice. He always gives lovely presents.’

When the wrappers were at last removed the little sisters gave a simultaneous exclamation of delight. Each packet contained a beautiful Prayer-book, bound in Russia leather, of some dark, rich hue, with gilt clasps and rims, red rubrics, and beautiful clear type. Such Prayer-books, indeed, the little girls had never seen before, and their cheeks flushed with delight as they bent over their new treasures—such delight as only those children can feel who do not often experience the pleasure of receiving gifts.

In each book a name was written, and underneath a few words that looked like a text, though the children did not try to read them then.

Oh, how kind of him; what a *nice* Bishop he is! I never saw such lovely books in all my life!

'They are pretty, and must have cost an awful lot of money; but what a pity they are Prayer-books,' said Judy.

'Think what a scrumptious lot of jolly things the money would have bought,' added Punch.

But the little sisters seemed quite satisfied as they carefully folded up their treasures again, and put them all together in safety.

'I think a Prayer-book is just the nicest thing a Bishop could possibly give,' said Letty; 'and I am quite sure father and mother will think so too.'

'Mrs. Bishop gave us each a lovely story-book,' added Dolly; 'I think they are the kindest people that ever lived.'

"Mrs. Bishop" indeed, you little goose! Did you call her that to her face?"

Poor Dolly subsided at once, crimsoning with shame. She was not in the least used to the rough and ready banter that was the current coin in her cousins' vocabulary, and felt as if somebody had hit her in the face. Letty came valiantly to the rescue.

'Of course we know she is Mrs. Ellersley; she told us so herself: but we like to say Mrs. Bishop among ourselves. I don't think *you* need talk; you never hardly call anything by its right name.'

There was another laugh and a little sparring, but Letty was liked none the less for being able to hold her own.

It was a long strange day to the little girls, shut up in the big railway carriage with these new relations.

The elder members of the party dozed or read, and left the children to their own devices; the boys sat by the windows and talked, and sometimes left the carriage at one stopping-place, and only returned after several stations had been passed. Jessie and Hilda had books to amuse them, and sometimes they would come over and chat to the little ones, but more often kept in their own corner. The twins and the three little strangers amused themselves and one another as well as they could, and meals made a variety every now and then. Still the time began to drag somewhat heavily at the end. There was a tendency on the part of the juniors to be snappish and short-tempered, and more cross and angry words and taunts were exchanged among them in an hour than the little sisters had heard in a lifetime. Nor did the parents make any attempt to check the rising tide of irritability and temper. They seemed quite used to such trifling outbreaks, and did not appear to see the need of keeping them under. It was this aspect of the case that, perhaps, most surprised the clergyman's little daughters. They felt so astonished that the cross expressions did not grieve and trouble the parents. What would their own father and mother have said to them if they had gone on so? But Aunt Hilda's face was quite undisturbed, and she seemed not to know that anything was going wrong.

However, they had never expected Aunt Hilda to be like mother, so there was no disappointment to be encountered; but it was a relief to all when at last the train drew up at a small station, and they found that the long journey had come to an end.

CHAPTER VII

TARNSIDE

‘OH! isn’t it lovely?’ breathed Dolly softly.

The three little sisters were standing at the window of their new bedroom in their aunt’s house, looking over a wide expanse of heathery mountain slopes, wood and water, like nothing that even their wildest dreams had pictured.

‘I wish mother could see it,’ said Patty wistfully; ‘she does so love beautiful things. I wish she were here with us.’

Dolly felt rather like crying, partly from fatigue, partly from home-sickness; for these little girls felt far more lonely in this house full of cousins than they had done in the Bishop’s palace, where there had been so few people.

The moment the party had arrived at Tarnside the cousins had dispersed hither and thither in wild excitement, to visit all their favourite spots. There had been so many meals in the train that nobody wanted anything to eat immediately. There was some vague talk of a meat-tea presently; but the immediate interest of the whole party was concentrated on the house and garden.

Nobody had time or thought to spend on the little guests. A rosy nursery-maid had shown them their room, and brought them some warm water, and they had then been left to their own devices; and except for the lovely prospect from the window, it seemed as if there were little to cheer or welcome them. But Letty was in better spirits than the other two, having naturally a higher courage and greater power of enjoyment; and something in the fresh keen air, or the novelty of the situation, or the romantic appearance of the large and curious house, gave food for pleasant anticipations that adverse circumstances could not entirely damp. So whilst the other two stood at the window, battling against depression and a desire to weep, Letty ran hither and thither through the room and corridor, and tried to make out all she could about the strange place they had come to.

Tarnside was a very queer old house, built at different times, and in no regular style; but the whole effect was pleasant and harmonious, and despite its many peculiarities, it was a well-arranged and comfortable place.

It was built in quadrangular form. The great south front, which rose two stories high, with big windows flashing in the sunlight, was of modern date, and contained all the reception and living rooms, as well as the bedchambers of the adult members of the family and their guests. The east wing, which was older and lower, being only one story high, comprised the kitchens, domestic offices, and the servants' bedrooms; whilst the corresponding west wing was given up to the children, and contained their living and sleeping rooms. Each wing had its own independent stair-

case, so that children and servants were quite isolated in their respective domains.

The north side of the quadrangle was occupied mainly by a very ancient and very ponderous gateway, from which the old portcullis chains still hung, though coated with the rust of ages. There were also one or two rooms on either side the gateway. Those adjoining the east wing were seldom used, unless the house was very full, and an extra number of servants was required. Those on the opposite side, in communication with the west wing, were shut off from it, both on the ground-floor and on the upper corridor, by heavy baize doors, which were always kept locked. This fact the inquisitive Letty found out for herself the very first evening, though it did not then arouse any surprise or speculation in her mind. Everything was too strange to her for any one discovery to awaken special interest.

The middle of the quadrangle was occupied by a square grass-plot, broken up by a few clumps of rhododendrons. It did not get much sun, so flowers did not do well there. The corridor windows in both wings looked out upon this grass-plot, the rooms opening off them all having beautiful views over wide expanses of country.

The pleasant room occupied by the three little sisters was at the end of the west-wing corridor—the one at the corner where the passage turned sharp round to the right, and would have led towards the old gateway had it not been for the closed baize doors. Letty saw this by putting her head out of the corridor window, and thought how nice it would be if the doors were not

there, and she could run round and see if there were any way of getting into the queer old turreted gateway. But she had too much to examine to trouble herself over it long, and very soon was calling her sisters to admire the funny panels over the fireplace in their room, and to see how queer everything was, and what a romantic house it was altogether.

'Romantic' was one of Letty's favourite words. She lived in a little world of romance all her own. She was never tired of planning games of adventure and sensational incident to be played with her sisters when they had time to enjoy them. As these wordy games could be played while they sat quietly over their needlework (though a certain amount of action heightened the interest and excitement), they made quite a feature in the lives of the little girls, and Letty now felt as if a wide new field had opened out before her in the ideas suggested by this old house.

'I expect historical people lived here once,' she confided to her sisters; 'Lady Jane Grey, perhaps, or Charles the First, or Mary Queen of Scots, or the Black Douglas. I shall ask Uncle Marmaduke about it some day. I should like to know its history. We can play it all over again. I am sure it must be very romantic.'

'Is it very old?' questioned Patty.

'Yes, *very*,' answered Letty, with characteristic decision; 'I am quite sure it is. I dare say there are dungeons and things under the old gate. I dare say if we dug down deep we should find lots and lots of bones.'

In common with many children of her temperament, Letty had a decided taste for horrors, and revelled rather than trembled in the idea of unearthing some

relics of a ghastly kind. Dolly shivered and exclaimed in horror, and Patty said, in her grown-up way, that it was not likely there would be anything of the kind in Aunt Hilda's house : but Letty was quite unchanged in her opinions, and shook her head with something of defiance.

' I expect there will be, all the same. There must be *something* odd in a queer old house like this. Perhaps it will be a ghost, or a shut-up room where nobody goes, or some noises at night that nobody understands. I don't much care which it is, but I am *sure* there will be something. What would be the good of having such a queer old house if there was nothing in it except what everybody has ?'

That argument seemed conclusive to Letty, and passed without reply. Dolly secretly hoped nothing very alarming would happen, and Patty, with her more mature mind, decided that it was only in books that people heard weird noises and saw strange sights.

However, Letty's eager chatter had driven away the gathering tears, and had made the other two forget their home-sickness a little. They busied themselves in unpacking the big box that had come up, notwithstanding the fact that the maid had offered to do it for them, and had seemed surprised that they were able to wait upon themselves at all. It was rather fun, they found, putting out their clothes, and dividing the numerous drawers in the great bureau, and the pegs in the hanging closet. This room had been Jessie's in old days, so it was well provided with accommodation for her plentiful wardrobe.

When all their possessions had been neatly arranged

to their own satisfaction, it had begun to grow a little dusk, and the sound of a bell beneath warned them that tea-time had arrived. They soon found the staircase, and made their way, guided by the sound of voices, to the big double school or play room, in one half of which stood a table spread with all manner of appetizing viands.

‘Oh, here you are, children; we could not think what had become of you all this time!’ cried Hilda, who seemed to be the mistress of the ceremonies, for she was seated behind the urn. ‘You will have to amuse yourselves for a bit, I expect. The children are always wild with excitement for the first week after we get into the country. I suppose you don’t mind being together, and going about with each other?’

‘We like it best, thank you,’ answered Patty. ‘We are so used to it, you see,’ she added hastily, lest her words should have sounded not quite polite.

But Hilda was not one to notice. The law of that family was frankness before politeness; it seemed what the boys called ‘rot’ to be diffident in speaking the unvarnished truth.

‘That’s all right; you will find lots to do, and you can run about and amuse yourselves just where you like, so long as you don’t invade the flower gardens, and the lawns in front of the south windows. I’ll soon show you the places where we may not go. Oh! here you are, Chi; that is right, just in time for tea. Have you launched the canoe safely?’

‘Yes, it looks jolly, and will be no end of a find for us; but I didn’t take it far—I hadn’t time. I’m jolly hungry, I know. Where are Jessie and Hec?’

‘They are going to dine late whilst we are here. Jessie asked if she might, and mamma said she didn’t mind, if papa didn’t. So she went and asked, and he said yes, if she would not tease to do it at home, until she was properly out. And then he said Hector might too, if he liked, but I don’t think he will care to, every day.’

‘Nor I,’ answered Chi, laughing. ‘It must be jolly slow down there, with all the old flunkeys moving about as if it was a funeral.’

‘And we’re not to go down to dessert any more,’ cried Judy; ‘papa says we’re getting too old and ugly—at least, Hector said he did, and those others,’ with a look at the three little visitors, ‘won’t have dresses fit to be seen in, so we are all to stay away. I’m very glad, because now we can be out till bedtime, and we shan’t be bothered to dress or anything;’ and Judy shook her wild black mane, and threw a big bread pellet at Punch.

The faces of the youngest three had crimsoned over as they heard the remark upon their appearance, which Judy had blurted out without a thought. Hilda saw the burning blushes, and though surprised and amused at such sensitiveness, good-naturedly tried to come to the rescue.

‘Oh, never mind what Hector tells Judy; he is always stuffing her up with some nonsense or other. It hasn’t anything to do with your frocks, really. I dare say you have some very nice ones. It’s grand-papa’s doing really, I expect. He isn’t a bit fond of children; so I expect he got mamma to banish Punch and Judy, for of course if they’d gone in, you would have had to go with them.’

Patty's face burnt still more at this explanation. It seemed to her such a proof that grandfather was still angry. Mother had said the anger was all over now: but if he did not want to have to see them or speak to her children, surely it must be because he was still cherishing the old resentment.

So Patty and Dolly sat mute and dismayed, for anything like ill-feeling or unkindness was so strange that it made them quite sad and troubled. But Letty, who had listened in round-eyed amaze to this explanation, now asked wonderingly:

'Do you mean that we shan't see grandfather ever?'

'Oh, well, I suppose you may see him sometimes, but I'm sure I don't know when.'

'Isn't he at breakfast?'

This question elicited a shout of laughter that almost offended the child, nor could she divine its cause.

'You little greenhorn! where was you *riz*?' cried Punch, shaking his fat sides. 'You don't suppose you are going to breakfast in the dining-room with the frumps, do you?'

Letty drew herself up with an air that would not have disgraced an empress.

'I do not understand your *extraworinary* way of talking, and I do not think it is at all polite either. At home we breakfast with our father and mother, and if we had a grandfather living with us, I suppose he would be there too. Do all your relations breakfast in bed?'

This query produced another roar of laughter, and Chi leaned over and patted Letty approvingly on the back.

‘Bravo, young un. You give it him well. It will do Punch a world of good to be taken down a peg now and then. But it strikes me you’ll find things very different here from what they are in your home. We have our meals in our own quarters, and have precious little to do with the elders of the house.’

‘We do have our dinner in the dining-room, when they lunch,’ said Judy, ‘but grandpapa is never there. He doesn’t take lunch. I don’t suppose we shall ever see him hardly.’

‘Not at prayers?’

‘Oh, we don’t have prayers; it isn’t convenient.’

Letty opened her eyes wide and said nothing. It seemed as if she had got into a new world about which she had everything as yet to learn.

Patty and Dolly exchanged covert glances of consternation. Those two, who had been told a little of the family history, and knew that there had been a long estrangement between certain of its members, had made up a little plot between them, such as children love to concoct—an innocent little plot which should have for its aim and object the healing of the breach, and the end of the sorrow that mother had suffered so long. From what she had said, and from the stories she had told them of grandfather, they were sure that once he had loved her very dearly, and father too. They had pictured him as a very kind, though possibly a stern man, and had laid many plans of how they would try to win his love, and get him to listen to stories of the goodness of father and the sweetness of mother. If only grandfather really understood all this, he would surely cease to be angry; and who could

explain to him what a dear and noble father he was so well as his own little daughters ?

So the two children had argued, and had built up their little airy castles, which had looked very fair in the distance ; but now at closer quarters they appeared likely to melt away, for, of course, the very first step was to form a friendship with grandfather himself, and yet, by what their cousins said, they were hardly likely to see him from one week's end to another, and he had earned the character of not liking children.

As soon as tea was over the others rushed off into the twilight and moonlight outside, and invited their cousins to come too, if they cared to do so ; but it was already past Letty's bedtime, and they were all very tired. Moreover, they had promised mother to go to bed regularly at the hour she had fixed, whether their cousins did so or not, so they went straight to their room, and dismissing the maid, who was much impressed by their tidy, helpful ways, undressed, said their prayers, and went to bed and to sleep.

They must have been asleep quite a long time, for the moon had set when Letty awoke with a start, and sat up in bed almost before her eyes were fairly open, feeling sure some strange noise had disturbed her. She had been dreaming of trains and engines, and it seemed as if the shrill whistle of the steam giant was still sounding in her ears.

One moment of uncertainty and suspense, and it came again—but the noise was not much like a steam-whistle after all. It was a long, high wail, not altogether unlike what the wind makes in a fierce storm, yet with more of human sound in it than that.

It began soft and sweet, and swelled up and up into a sort of shriek, like the cry of a lost spirit. Letty shivered as she listened, and the other two sleepers stirred in their beds, and Patty lifted her head.

'Is somebody calling?' she said drowsily.

'I think somebody is crying,' answered Letty, trying to keep from shivering, for really she was not very much frightened, but only surprised and bewildered. 'Wait a minute: perhaps it will come again. I have heard it twice. It isn't like anything I ever heard before. There—what *can* it be?'

High and shrill and full of wild despair came the cry again, but whether it proceeded from human lips or not was more than any of the children could say. They were all three thoroughly aroused by this time, and not a little scared too. Letty no longer felt any yearning after ghostly sounds or sights; she rather repented of her rashly spoken words of a few hours back.

'What *can* it be?' whispered Dolly, whose face was blanched by fear. 'I never heard anything like it before.'

'Nor I. I wonder if we ought to tell anyone,' said Patty, who was fairly terrified. 'Can it be anything or anyone crying for help?'

'I don't think so,' answered Letty. 'It doesn't come often enough for that, or seem quite like it. It is like as if someone were crying on and on, and wouldn't stop to be comforted—there it goes again!'

There was something just the least little bit reassuring in the repetition of the sounds, alarming as they were. It might possibly be the wind in some

think or cranny somewhere, or an æolian harp that somebody had put up to produce a noise like that, and this suggestion from Patty's practical lips did much to stay their terrors and still the fluttering pulses.

The sounds, though still heard at intervals, had lessened in intensity, and had sunk to a sort of sobbing wail. Letty, who was no coward, and who was not as nervous in the dark as most children are, boldly jumped out of bed at last, and looked out into the corridor beyond.

'Don't go,' pleaded the more timid Dolly, who felt that it would take a mighty effort on her part to make her leave her warm bed; but Letty made no reply, and the little white figure glided bodily from the room, and vanished in the darkness.

'Oh, I wish she wouldn't! Suppose some harm comes to her,' shivered Dolly.

'I don't see how it could in Aunt Hilda's house, but I'll go after her if she does not come back directly,' answered Patty with praiseworthy courage, for she did not feel at all like getting out of bed.

However, before she had put this resolve into practice Letty reappeared, and came softly in, closing the door behind her, and creeping into the bigger bed in which both the elder sisters were sleeping. She was cold, and shivered a little.

'Oh, Letty! what is it? What have you seen?'

'I haven't exactly seen anything, but I think I've found something out. No, I'm not frightened, though I can't help shivering, and you needn't be frightened either, Dolly. But I *do* think there *is* something funny

about this house, and I think things are going to be romantic, too.'

Letty spoke with a mixture of triumph and trepidation that might have been comical had her listeners been in the mood to laugh. As it was, they only pressed closer to her, asking in low tones :

'Do tell us what you saw.'

'I saw lights in two windows on this story—the two windows on this side of the gateway—and the noise came out of that room, for I heard it again, though not so loud. And all the other windows are dark, and it is just beginning to get light in the sky, so it is not the time any ordinary person would be up. And Judy told us where everybody slept—even the servants—and there wasn't one of them in that room, because I was listening to see, for I wanted to know if there was anything behind the red doors. But there must be somebody there, because of the noise and the light, and I mean to find out some day what it is.'

'You don't think we need call anybody to-night and tell them?'

'No, I don't think we need. It isn't our house, and perhaps they do know—somebody must know, of course, though I don't think Judy does, or if she does she didn't tell us—but perhaps it is a secret, and a mystery; but even if it is, I believe *I* shall find it out!'

And with that Letty curled herself round, without troubling to seek her own bed, and was soon fast asleep again, an example that was quickly followed by the other two, and all slept quietly till morning.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HUT IN THE WOOD

THE golden light of a glorious summer morning awoke the three little sisters in due course, and Letty sprang out of bed and ran to the window, exclaiming with delight, as she drew up the blind, at the wonderful beauty of the scene spread before their eyes. Lovely as it had looked in the light of sunset, it was still more exquisite in the dewy dawn, with the mystic, hazy indistinctness of the new-born day still hanging like a mantle upon the sleeping world, and robing it in a fairy garment of shining gossamer.

What the hour was none of the children could guess. They had forgotten to ask over-night what would happen in the morning, and they were too unused to visiting to be able to form a guess on their own account. At home Nan came with water for the bath, and all was plain sailing enough, but who could say what would happen in a strange house? And how dreadful it would be to be late on the very first morning! Besides, none of the little girls felt at all like sleeping any more, so they agreed to get up at once, and take a stroll before breakfast if there should be time. There was a big bath in a small dressing-room

adjoining, and although the water was very cold they enjoyed splashing about in it very much, and laughed so merrily over their toilet that people who called them grave and demure children would have been quite surprised.

Of the strange sounds that had disturbed them the previous evening not a word was spoken. Each child fancied that perhaps it had been a dream, and even if not, there was no need to recall anything of an unpleasant kind, when the world was sparkling in the sunshine, and ghostly fears seemed an absurdity. The novelty of their surroundings gave them plenty to think of, and Patty and Dolly rather hoped that it was only a trick of fancy, and that Letty would forget all about it.

Just as they were all ready a clock began to strike, and Patty held up her hand to command silence.

One—two—three—four—five.

The children stared at one another a moment in silence, and then began to laugh. How funny it was! Only five o'clock, and they had been hurrying, half afraid they might be late for breakfast!

'Never mind,' cried Letty; 'let's go out for a walk.'

'People won't mind, will they?'

'I shouldn't think so. We can undo the door at the bottom of our own staircase without disturbing anybody,' answered Patty; 'Judy said they sometimes went out early—before breakfast; but—but suppose we read first?'

'Why, we have read!' cried Letty; 'we shouldn't ever forget our chapter, I don't think.'

'No,' answered Patty slowly; 'I was thinking of

something else. You know there won't be any prayers by-and-by.'

'Yes, doesn't it seem queer!'

'And I was wondering,' pursued Patty gravely, 'if we couldn't have a sort of prayers by ourselves. I think perhaps father and mother would, if they were in a house where there weren't any.'

Both little sisters were quite pleased at the idea. To do what father and mother would do, or would like them to do, was a source both of interest and gratification. They looked to Patty for farther instructions. She was quite a little oracle in her way.

'What shall we do? We can't have a real proper service, can we?'

'I think we might take our Bishop Prayer-books, and read the Psalms for the day,' suggested Patty, after a little thought. 'I don't think mother would mind our using them for that, though I know she will wish us to take great care of them. It would make it nicer to have our beautiful new books.'

Dolly and Letty were delighted.

'It will be just the thing—so nice and *churchy*,' said the latter eagerly, as Patty lifted the beautiful prayer-books carefully out of their drawer; 'you must read the beginning versé, and Dolly and I will be congregation, and read ours together. It will be almost as if we were at home, at morning church.'

The simple little service was soon concluded, the books put carefully away, and then the children were ready for their ramble.

'Shan't we get very hungry?' suggested Letty; 'I feel as if I could eat some breakfast now.'

'We've got some sandwiches Mrs. Bishop gave us,' said Dolly; 'and we didn't eat them in the train because there were proper meals there. We might have them now.'

It was a happy idea; and taking their provisions with them, the three children stole quietly out into the corridor, and down the stairs, and found no difficulty in unbarring the door which they knew gave access to the world outside.

Not a creature seemed awake either within or without. The great house seemed still sleeping, with all its shutters closed and blinds fast drawn. There were wide gravel walks running in terrace fashion all round it, and beyond that shrubberies, lawns, or brilliant flower garden as the case might be.

'Let us have one prowl all round,' whispered Letty, who was growing quite excited; 'I should so like to see what it looks like in front, and nobody would mind our going when everybody was asleep.'

So hand in hand the little maidens stole down the path, and turned the angle of the house which brought them in view of the great sunny south garden, that stretched away down the hill in front of the large modern block of building that contained all the best rooms of the house. It was beautifully laid out in brilliant ribbon borders, grass and gravel terraces, with terra-cotta balustrading, and clipped yew hedges that looked almost like little walls, they were so square and trim.

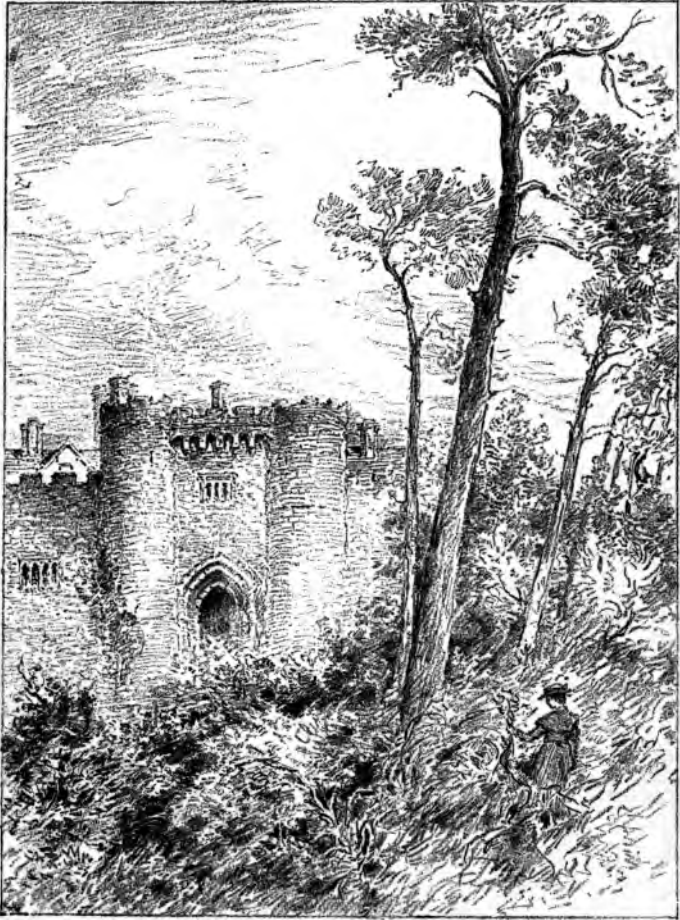
Farther down the hill lay some timbered parkland, and at the bottom of the ravine a little river ran its brawling course, and lost itself in the big dark

piece of water that lay half a mile away upon the right.

The children stood looking with great admiration upon this beautiful garden, lying like an oasis in the midst of what was so wild and bold and even grandly desolate, but on the whole they cared less for the bright flowers and emerald lawns than for the heathery slopes and fir-clad hills that stretched all around them. In the glamour of a summer's dawn the whole world was like fairyland, and Letty led the way back under their windows, and only paused when they had turned the next angle, and were in the shadow of the great gateway.

'It's a funny gate,' she said. 'It is rather romantic, I think, to live in a house that is guarded by a great gate like that. I should like to go into the queer little room over it some day if I might: I wonder if anybody lives up there.'

Letty's sharp eyes were scanning not only the gateway but also the windows next to it, and a little postern door that she fancied would give access to these rooms from the outside. The windows were bright and clean, and were fitted with blinds and curtains, and there was nothing in the aspect they presented to suggest the idea of emptiness or neglect. One blind was pulled halfway up, and the window was partly open, so that Letty could see the hangings and make out that there was furniture in the room. She felt a great curiosity to know who lived there, and wondered if the occupant had made those strange noises last night. But she said not a word to her sisters, for she had no wish to frighten them, or to get laughed at for making



THE GATEWAY AT TARNSIDE.



a mystery out of nothing ; and either of these things might happen if she spoke out her inmost thoughts upon the matter.

Behind the house on this north side the hill rose somewhat steeply—a hill clothed in pine-wood, whose ruddy stems rose up tall and bare, in long aisles and alleys, whilst the golden sunshine slanting in and mingling with the dim shadows that lurked in its deep recesses gave it a sort of mystic beauty that was a study in itself.

‘ Oh ! ’ said Dolly, turning round and catching sight of the fairy-like palace of trees—‘ oh, how lovely ! Do you think we might go in there ? I never saw anything so beautiful.’

‘ Come along,’ cried the ever-bold Letty. ‘ Why, of course we may go in. There isn’t even a fence to keep anyone out. It is nice having trees growing right up to one’s house like this. I thought so last night when we came in. Let’s go and eat our sandwiches there.’

There was only the road to cross, and the children found themselves in the wood. They wandered on a little way, until they lost sight of the house, and were alone with the whispering trees, and then, sitting down on the fragrant carpet of pine-needles, they partook of their simple meal. They could not have chosen a better place for an early morning ramble, as there was but little dew beneath the pines, and no underwood to tear their clothes, or sprinkle them with shining drops. Moreover, the fascination of this still, grand wood, with its never-ending vistas of purple shadow, and its countless army of sentinel-like trees, exercised a strong hold upon them, and they wandered about in complete con-

ment for quite a long time. Presently they reached a spot where a little stream trickled through the wood, and its banks were fringed with young beeches and alders, and some wild flowers grew luxuriantly in the little dell. Dolly and Patty exclaimed with delight, and began to gather posies as they loved to do, whilst Letty, her mind more engrossed with her own dreams of romance, and the vague hope of adventure, continued her wanderings, promising not to go far and to come back to her sisters presently.

The adventures of which Letty was in search were of a purely fictitious character. She could play games in her head by the hour together as to what was happening to her and the companions of her imagination, and such a spot as this was a capital setting to any kind of romance; but some ten minutes after leaving her sisters she was aroused from her dream by a sound that in a lonely place like this was just a little alarming.

The sound was the deep, angry growl of a dog, and Letty, turning quickly round, saw that a great bloodhound had risen up as if from the ground itself, and was staring at her with lashing tail and a fierce red light in his eyes. Letty was not timid with animals, and generally made friends readily with dogs, but there was something so menacing in the lurid light of the eyes bent upon her, that she gave a little startled cry, and would have turned to run, had not some instinct warned her that this was the very way to make the hound spring upon her. The creature growled again more angrily than before, and looked just as if he would fly at her throat, when a short, sharp

whistle was heard at no great distance, and the huge animal turned sullenly to obey the summons, though with manifest reluctance. Frightened as Letty had been, she was full of curiosity too, and as soon as she saw the big dog in full retreat, she began cautiously to follow him, thinking that she might chance perhaps upon some robbers' cave, and by discovering its whereabouts do a great service to her uncle.

But next minute she came upon a sight so much more peaceful than anything she had pictured to herself that she was half ashamed of her former fancies.

In a small clearing in the heart of the wood stood a rustic hut of simple construction, and as the door stood wide open, she could see right in. There was a carpet on the floor, and the windows were glazed and curtained, and in addition to a table and chair and other fittings of a homely kind, was a sort of couch, such as invalids like, with movable sloping back and other contrivances for comfort. Lying at full length upon this couch, talking to the hound and pulling his ears in half-caressing fashion, was a young man, whose face Letty could only imperfectly see.

She was very much astonished, but not at all afraid: it seemed a very funny thing that a sick man should be living in a hut out in the wood, and she thought he must be sick, because he was lying down, and because his hands were so very, very thin and white: but certainly there did not seem anything to be afraid of, and Letty, in her great curiosity and love of adventure, drew slowly nearer. The hound heard her soft steps, even if his master did not, and broke into another of

his angry growls, and would have sprung forward if he had not felt his master's detaining hand ; as it was, he looked so fierce that the child paused again, and the young man, raising himself up on his elbow, looked round to see what had angered the dog.

It was then that he saw, for the first time, the little figure creeping timidly out of the shadows of the trees ; and so much astonished did he appear at the unexpected intrusion, that he remained quite still and silent, giving Letty ample opportunity to study his face.

Perhaps the thing that struck her first was the great sadness she saw in its lines ; the second, how dreadfully ill he looked—more ill than a great many of the parish poor she had visited in their beds. The face was thin and hollow, the features were lined with pain. The dark eyes in their deep sockets seemed to look out with unutterable sadness and gloom upon the bright world around. Eyes more experienced than Letty's would have detected traces of passion as well as of suffering in that worn face. He looked like one whose hand is against everyone, and everyone's hand against him. It was a sad face to look upon, doubly sad in one so young—for he could hardly number more than five-and-twenty summers, though many men double that age have more of boyhood in their looks. Then the tall frame had wasted almost to a shadow, and every languid movement seemed attended with something of pain and difficulty.

After a long stare at the child who had invaded his solitude, the young man's brow contracted, and he said sharply :

‘ What are you doing here, little girl ? ’

‘We came out for a morning walk,’ answered Letty sociably. ‘We got up very early by mistake, and didn’t know what to do. I hope I don’t intrude.’

And something in the child’s old-fashioned way of saying the last words seemed to tickle the fancy of the young man, for he broke into a short laugh, and recognising the fact that, despite her plainly-made dress and mushroom hat, he was talking to a little lady, his manner changed somewhat.

‘Well, it is a good thing my dog didn’t fly at you, for strangers have no right to trespass here, though I dare say you knew nothing about that; and Lucifer has been trained to his business, and knows how to deal with intruders. You have come a long way, I dare say.’

‘Oh yes, a *very* long way,’ answered Letty, in the simplest good faith, for she had no idea that the house was barely half a mile away; it seemed to her as if they had walked an indefinite number of miles. ‘I don’t live here. I’m only on a visit to some relations who have a house a few miles away.’

‘In Witham, perhaps?’

‘That was the name of the station we came to. I forget just what the house is called. Do you live here in this funny little hut?’

‘No, I don’t live here, but I spend a good deal of time here in the summer.’

‘Are you ill?’

‘Well, I am not quite as well as I might be,’ with a shade of bitterness in his tone.

‘I am so sorry. I am always sorry for ill people. What is the matter with you?’

‘Oh, you wouldn’t understand. It’s something with my leg, and a lot of other things besides. I’m just a useless log, and the sooner——’

But the rest of the sentence was never spoken. There was something in the sympathetic look on the child’s face that seemed to check the flow of bitter words. He broke off short, and Letty asked eagerly:

‘But how do you get here if your leg is bad—do you have yourself carried?’

‘No, I have not quite sunk to that yet; I can hobble a little way alone with a stick.’

‘Then you live near?’

‘Yes, quite near.’

‘And do you get up early like this every day?’

‘No, not every day; but I do sometimes, if I cannot sleep; and then I crawl out here to see the sun rise.’

‘Does the doctor mind? Most sick people would not be allowed.’

A strange look crossed the young man’s face.

‘The doctor does not interfere with me now,’ he said; ‘I am allowed to do as I please.’

‘That must be rather nice, I should think,’ returned Letty, with childish interest and frankness. ‘Do you like seeing people here? for if you do, I’ll come again some day, if I can find the way.’

The young man hesitated, looked at her eager face a moment, and then said slowly:

‘Well, I don’t know that I mind much. You can do as you like about it—only on one condition.’

‘And what is that?’

‘That you don’t tell a single person about me. If

you will keep it a secret, you may come if you like, though I may not always be here.'

This was very interesting, Letty thought. Perhaps this melancholy young man was in hiding for some romantic crime he had committed, or from some cruel kinsman who would do him a deadly injury. It all fitted in with the dreams she loved to indulge, and she entered into the idea of keeping his secret with a zest that must have surprised him somewhat.

'Oh no, I won't say a word—indeed I won't—not even to Patty and Dolly. It would be very dishonourable if I did, because I was trespassing when I found you, and *of course* I would not betray you for the world. You may trust me—indeed you may;' and she looked so desperately in earnest that the young man first glanced at her half suspiciously, and then laughed.

'You are a queer little card, but I dare say you are to be trusted to keep your word, and if you like to come again, you may.'

'I shall come very soon,' answered Letty confidently; 'and please will you tell your big dog not to eat me?'

'Oh, he'll let you alone now he has seen me talk to you. He never forgets a face. But if you tell tales, or bring anyone with you, it may be the worse for that person. It is no joke to anger Lucifer.'

Voices in the distance calling Letty broke up the conference, and the child took to her heels. She soon found her sisters, but kept her own counsel as to her adventure. Indeed, their time and attention were pretty well absorbed in finding their way home, and when they did at last reach the house it was nearly breakfast-time, and Punch and Judy were both in

the room, and were quite impressed to hear that their cousins had been out and about since five o'clock in the morning.

'Perhaps we'll get up another time, if you'll only wake us,' they said, regarding the new-comers with more respect. 'We'll have jolly fun now, anyway, and if the days aren't long enough without, we must get up early and make them longer.'

The other members of the west-wing party came dropping in, and the day was soon fairly begun. There was so much to see and so much to do that for that and several other days there seemed no leisure for quiet thought. The little sisters, though by no means sharing all the more dangerous sports of their cousins, were yet drawn more or less into the vortex, and lived in what was to them a continual whirl. They slept so soundly after their fatigues that they heard no more strange sounds from behind the doors that were always kept locked, nor had they time to think about the puzzle, any more than Letty had time to visit the hut in the wood, even if she could have found it, of which she was not confident. Indeed, the events of the first twelve hours of their stay at Tarnside soon began to fade into the similitude of a dream, and Letty almost forgot her romantic visions, in the more immediate practical interest of the present, and so closed the first week of the long-talked-of visit to Aunt Hilda.

CHAPTER IX

THE SQUIRE'S PEW

THE first Sunday spent at Tarnside had passed without any church-going, for a heavy thunderstorm had come on in the morning and kept the household at home, the church being at some little distance. This had been a matter of disappointment to the little sisters, who felt that a Sunday spent without going to church was not much like a Sunday at all; but on the next Sunday morning the sun shone with all his might in the blue sky, and the cousins appeared at breakfast in very pretty frocks, and talked freely of the church they were going to, and the people they would be likely to see there.

'Let's go early,' said Hilda to her favourite Chi. 'I like to see them all come in. I wonder if Mrs. Holt-whistle still wears the same old antediluvian bonnet with a curtain to it, and if that funny old man who makes remarks in the sermon is still extant.'

'Why does he make remarks?' asked Letty, with great interest. 'Don't they tell him not to?'

'Oh no, nobody minds. I don't think he would care if they did. He is very old, and half silly, and he grunts and snorts and says "Ah," "Oh," and all that

kind of thing; and it is so funny to hear him, I quite like him to be there. Church is so dull when nothing happens to amuse us—especially a church like ours.'

Letty opened her eyes wide, but said nothing. She had learnt by this time that her cousins held many opinions that seemed very peculiar to her and her sisters.

'If you can make yourself look a little more like other people, you may come with us,' said Hilda, who had rather a liking for Letty, and was good-natured, though decidedly hot-tempered too. 'I suppose you have some kind of a best frock to put on? Mamma likes us to look nice in church, for all the visitors see us there, and all the people about too, and it doesn't do to be guys.'

Letty had grown used to hear criticisms passed upon their neat but very plain little frocks, and did not trouble her head much about it now. If mother liked them, it did not matter what other people said or thought.

'We've got one white frock each for very hot weather or special occasions,' she answered, with a gleam in her eye that showed a capacity for humour rather beyond her years. 'But I suppose going to church is rather a special occasion with you.'

Hilda laughed, and Chi flung a pellet of bread at her, which missile she returned with interest. Letty was becoming infected by the high spirits of the family of which she was now a member, and was losing some of the little demure ways which had characterized all the children at first. She seemed also to be infected partially by the hotter tempers of her new comrades,

and had more than once had a regular battle with Judy. Letty was always ashamed afterwards, when her temper had got the better of her, whilst the cousins seemed to think nothing at all about it, and treated quarrels as part of the existing law of nature, not worth troubling over when the actual moment had passed. When Letty begged Judy's pardon for being cross, she only got laughed at for her pains, and even after what seemed at the time a most dreadful tempest, there was no making up afterwards. People came out of their 'tantrums' or their 'sulks' just when and as they pleased, and as a rule a few hours saw the sky all clear again. As is often the case in hot-tempered families, quarrels, though fierce, were of brief duration. But the very uncertainty of the domestic atmosphere, and the tremendous storms that would arise almost about nothing, were a source of great perplexity to the little guests, and tried Dolly's nerves severely; for she was a timid, rather fragile little thing, without either Letty's high courage or Patty's womanly practical shrewdness, and she found herself longing for home and mother twenty times a day.

However, to-day all seemed to be going smoothly. There was none of the conflict of wills as to the day's employment that often disturbed the peace of the breakfast-table, and all the cousins seemed in good humour. It was nice to feel that the long first week was over at last, and if only they had had better accounts from the parish, Dolly would have been almost happy. As it was, they kept hearing of more and more illness there, and it seemed as if things were very serious. Father and mother were too busy to

send more than very brief notes to their darlings, and in those notes they told of the death of several old friends whom the children had seen in church or field day by day, and week by week, ever since they could remember. The one bright spot in the dark picture was the Bishop's wonderful gift to the parish, which had come, as mother said, 'almost like an answer to prayer.' The comfort and help those great parcels had given were beyond all power of expression. It was pleasant to think about that side of the picture, but the rest was dark enough, and darkest of all to Dolly, because she could not enter with the same zest into the pleasures which absorbed her cousins, and to a certain extent her sisters—boating, paddling in the shallows, exploring little caves in the hillside, and playing noisy games in the firwood. Dolly was too timid to enjoy any of these things, and her natural timidity was increased by the certainty that there was something strange and *uncanny* in the house itself. Whilst her sisters had been asleep at night, she had several times since heard the strange wailing sound which had filled them with so much dread the first evening, and from slight hints dropped from time to time by her cousins, she was convinced that there was some mystery enshrouded in that house. Judy had confided to her one day, in one of her teasing moods, that the rooms next theirs were always kept locked up because they were haunted, and Punch had further added some gruesome details about a headless woman, who walked about the passages looking for the missing member.

Dolly had been too much frightened even to talk to

Patty about it, which was a pity, for Patty would have told her that it was all nonsense. Dolly was a little ashamed of her own credulity, but her nervousness was constitutional, and hardly her fault; and she was the more disposed to believe what she heard from the fact that all her cousins, even Jessie and Hector, who seemed almost like grown-up people, avoided any allusions to those shut-up rooms, and did not answer the questions that Letty had once or twice propounded. All this had been noticed with awe by the quiet, observant Dolly, and the whole thing so preyed upon her mind that she was getting almost ill. But she had no idea of this. All she knew was that she was very home-sick, and that she missed mother more every day of her life.

Letty was in very good spirits, however. None of the terrors that preyed upon Dolly's mind affected her in any way. She was pleased to be selected as the companion of Hilda and Chi, for whom she had a decided admiration, and she donned her white frock with great glee, and set off with her big companions some time before anybody else thought of starting.

'Is the church far away?' she asked, as they passed under the gateway, and crossed the road towards one of the paths that led through the fir-wood behind. 'It seems so funny to have to walk a long way to church. At home we have only to go through the churchyard. We have a gate leading out of our garden.'

'What a nice, cheerful arrangement!' remarked Chi; 'I do dote on a handy churchyard—it suggests such jubilant thoughts.'

Hilda laughed, and Letty stared—she was often

puzzled to know what the remarks of her big boy-cousins meant.

‘What house is nearest to this wood?’ she asked suddenly, for she had remembered her friend with the big dog, who lived somewhere in its depths, and, without betraying any knowledge of him, she thought she might find out where he lived; he had said it was somewhere quite close round.

‘There isn’t any house near but ours,’ answered Hilda. ‘The wood belongs to us. There are no houses in it.’

Letty looked puzzled and astonished.

‘None at all?’

‘No—no houses! There may be a cottage or two, perhaps. I’m sure I don’t know. Why?’

‘Oh, I was only wondering!’ answered Letty, confused. ‘I like the wood. I should have thought people would have liked to build houses there: it is so pretty.’

‘I dare say they might; but you see papa would not allow them. It is all his property, and he is very particular. He won’t have people trespassing about it.’

‘Doesn’t he let anybody in?’

‘Not that I know of—unless they have some business there. But there are hardly any people about here. They wouldn’t care to come; there isn’t anything to bring them.’

Letty was puzzled, but said no more. Plainly the ‘ill young man,’ who lived in hiding quite close by, was keeping his secret very well. It was all very odd and romantic, she thought, but it would not do to ask any suspicious questions.

The walk to church was rather long and rather hot: but presently they came in sight of a tiny village nestling down in a wooded hollow, with the church-tower just peeping up above the trees. It was as small a church as the one at home, Letty said; and at first she thought it would remind her of theirs when she got inside, but she soon found that this was by no means the case, and what she saw there caused her no little surprise.

At home there were open sittings, and the village people were treated exactly the same as the few wealthier ones and the Rector's family; indeed, the best seats were for the most part allotted to them, for the infirm and deaf old people were put in places far from the draught of the doors, and near to the pulpit, and there was no kind of distinction made between gentle and simple. All were treated alike in God's house, and the poorest were as well seated as the richest.

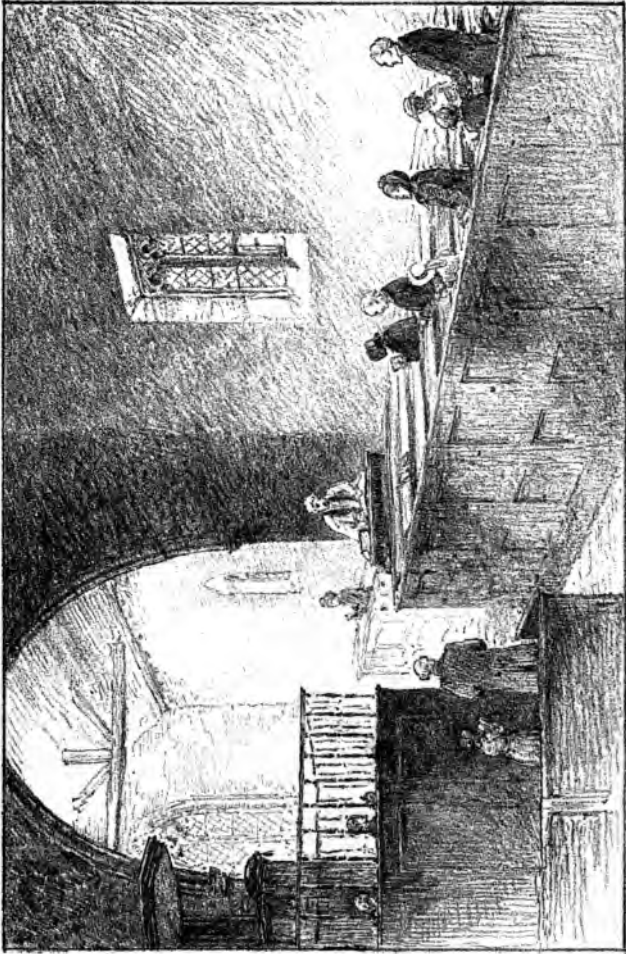
But here things were quite different. The pews were of black oak, and so tall that little could be seen of the congregation until they rose to their feet. Then they all belonged by a sort of right to certain farms and houses in the parish; and though the owners in many cases never thought of attending the service, they would have been much displeased if their seats had been given to the poor villagers. For the cottagers, therefore, there was hardly any accommodation. There were a few mouldy-looking benches under the tower, right at the back of the church, and here they might sit if they liked, whilst the school children were pent up in a little gallery, which looked as if it had

been flung against the wall, and stuck on anyhow. When Letty and her companions reached the church, there was hardly a soul there; and Letty's first surprise was greatly increased as they advanced up the dark aisle to see in the centre of the church something that looked almost like a small pavilion or summer-house directly in front of the pulpit, blocking out from a great part of the congregation the view of the clergyman. There was no roof to this place, it is true; but such an erection in a church the child had never seen before, and she was so astonished that she could find no words in which to frame a question, and simply followed Hilda in silence.

But her surprise was by no means diminished when her cousin went straight up to this curious erection, opened a door in it, and beckoned her in. With wide-open wondering eyes Letty followed, and found herself in one of those big old-fashioned room-like pews which used to be common enough, but are now fast becoming obsolete.

It was certainly wonderfully like a small room. It had even a fireplace in it, and a small table, in the drawer of which books seemed to be kept. There were chairs along two sides of the room, two rows facing the pulpit, and one running at right angles to it. The chairs were comfortable enough, though shabby, and there was a footstool to each; but the whole thing was so strange to Letty that she could only stare in amazed silence.

'Come along,' whispered Hilda. 'Now we will take the most amusing seats, and I will tell you about the people as they come in. Papa and mamma and visitors



THE SQUIRE'S PEW.

sit in these seats, facing the pulpit, and so they can't see anybody in the church at all; but we sit along this side, and we can see a good deal, because you see the pew-wall is not nearly so high on the side opposite. These corner seats are the nicest to have. Why, child, how scared you look!

'I can't think what this place is for. Why, it takes up a quarter of the church. I never saw such a horrid thing,' and Letty's heart swelled with indignation.

'Oh, I rather like it! It is so comfortable. It's the squire's pew, you know. It has been here for years and years—as long as people can remember. There used to be a roof over it, people say, and windows, too; and once when the squire and the rector had a quarrel, the squire used to shut up all the windows tight whenever the sermon began. But that was ever so long ago. People aren't half so funny now. They never do things like that.'

Letty was so scandalized at this flippancy that she would not even answer. She turned to Chi and asked:

'And where do the poor people sit, if you take up so much room? Do they have the rest of the pews?'

'Not they; those are for the farmers and gentry—such as they are. The poor people don't trouble the church much. They go under the tower when they do come, I believe.'

'Well,' cried the child indignantly, 'I think it is the horriddest church I was ever in in my life. I should like to write to the Bishop about it. I can't think why somebody does not.'

And at that Chi laughed so heartily that Letty was quite offended, and sat quite still and silent, whilst the

sexton pulled dismally at the cracked bell, and the meagre congregation dropped in by ones and twos. She ignored Hilda's nudges, and whispered items of information about different people; and the convulsions of silent laughter that she and her brother indulged in, at sight of some of the rustic toilets of the farmers' wives and daughters, which struck their town-bred eyes as being supremely ridiculous. Letty did not see anything at all to laugh at, and she did not think that church was the place to come to in order to stare and laugh and whisper; so she moved away from her companions, and found all her places, sighing to herself because she felt so cross and put out in church, and wondering if it were very naughty of her.

The Tarnside party swept in with a great rustling of silks and crisp muslins. There were several guests now staying in the house, and the big pew was pretty full. It was close and hot in the little church when the doors were all shut; and the dull, droning service was a great contrast to what the children were used to in their little parish church. Letty could not see her sisters, for they were in a line with her; and in going into this queer pew Dolly had got separated from Patty, and had somehow got close to the grown-up people.

The service had not proceeded very far before Letty was aware of a little stir and tumult, and then the dreadful conviction came home to her that Dolly had begun to cry, and that somebody was taking her away. Letty felt hot all over, and she set her little teeth together, feeling that she would sooner die than disgrace herself like that. But Dolly always did cry so soon—it was one of those things Letty could not

understand, and she felt dreadfully ashamed ; the more so as she thought Aunt Hilda looked vexed, and certainly she signed to Patty to stay where she was, and not to go out after the delinquent. And what Dolly would feel like in one of her crying fits, with nobody but a stranger to take her home—and, perhaps, a cross stranger too—Letty simply could not imagine.

And, indeed, poor little Dolly was to be pitied. The hot walk to church had tired her out. The strangeness of that dreary church had filled her with fresh longings after mother and home ; and the isolation she felt when she found that even Patty was not at her side was as the last drop in her cup of wretchedness. She did not know that she was faint and almost ill : she only knew that she was utterly miserable ; and after a long struggle with herself, her strength had given way and she had burst into convulsive sobbing.

To make matters, if possible, worse, it chanced that she was seated next to the redoubtable grandfather, whom the children had hardly seen since the day of their joining their relatives at the station. It was he who first bent down, and rather harshly told the child to stop crying ; and when the rebuke only increased the violence of the sobs, he just rose, took her hand in his, and led her straight out of the church in face of the whole curious congregation.

Dolly would have been thankful if the earth would have opened and swallowed her up. She shook like an aspen leaf as she stood outside the church with her tall and dreadful grandfather towering high above her. Her sobs were quite uncontrollable, and seemed to tear her little slight frame to pieces. If only grandfather

would have spoken, even to scold her, it would have been endurable ; but the stony silence was terrible.

'Why, the bairn's sick,' said a rough but kindly voice somewhere close at hand. 'She can't hardly stand, and they don't cry like that for nowt. Happen the walk has been too much for the little missy. There, honey, don't ye cry your pretty eyes out. Coom ye here and sit doon i' the shade, and I'll get ye a sip o' water that will do ye a power o' good. There, that's more comfortable-like. Ye'll soon be better now.'

The fresher air was having some effect on the child, and the friendly words helped her still more. It was almost like being back in the parish to hear the uncouth talk of the sexton, and at last the child ventured to look timidly up.

The old man was hobbling off to his cottage for water ; but there was grandfather standing very upright not ten paces away, looking down at her from beneath his bushy, frowning brows in a fashion that made her heart die within her.

'Oh, please don't be angry with me,' she cried faintly ; 'I am so very sorry.'

The grim face relaxed a little.

'Oh, there, there, child, don't for goodness' sake begin again ! I am not angry. I don't suppose you meant it, and you look as white as a little ghost. What is the matter ? Aren't you well ?' The question, though abruptly put, was kindly meant ; and though Dolly still trembled, she was able to hold her tears in check.

'I don't think there's anything the matter, except that I do so *dreadfully* want mother.'

The child's lip quivered; but for the present the tears were all shed. Yet there was something very pathetic in the aspect of the wistful little face.

'Are you such a baby that you can't get on a single week without mother?' asked grandfather banteringly. 'Why, Judy would not cry if she were months away from home. How is that, I wonder?'

But Dolly could not generalize. She only knew that she felt hardly able to live now that there was no mother to go to.

'I was never away from her before,' sighed the child, 'and I do have such thoughts—I cannot help it—and they are so dreadful.'

There was such sudden misery in the tender little face that the grandfather was half startled.

'What do you mean, child? What thoughts? Are you frightening your little self over some silly bit of fancy?'

'I don't think it is all fancy,' said Dolly slowly, without looking up. 'For people get ill every day, and many of them die; and they sent us away because they thought we might catch it. And I cannot help thinking about father and mother. They are with the sick people in the parish every day. Suppose——'

Dolly choked and could not get on. But she had said enough to make her meaning clear, and grandfather started and looked at the child with a different expression.

'Is this fever then so very bad? We have not heard much of it from your mother.'

'She is so busy, you see, she has not much time to write. She is in the parish all the time, taking care of

the poor people who are ill. Mother hasn't *said* it is very bad; but I know it must be, because so many of the people we have asked about specially are very ill or dead. And she was so pleased with what the Bishop sent, and said they should not have known what to do without it at such a time, with fresh cases every day. Oh, what should we do if father or mother were to be ill? I think I should die—I hope I should.'

'Well, that would be a useful thing to do,' said grandfather, not, however, unkindly—indeed, his face had changed very much during the last few minutes. Dolly pressed her hands into her eyes as if to shut out some vision of pain.

'I can't help it—it is all so dreadful. Mother is not very strong, and father always works so hard, especially when there is illness or trouble, that it makes him thin and tired, and I know he will be in the parish all day and perhaps all night now, for they have almost everything to do themselves, because so many people have run away: and so they will be tired, and weak, and worn out, and then if they do catch it——'

'Child, child, you are too young to think in that fashion!' interrupted the old man almost sternly, though his face had turned a little pale. 'What do you know of such things?'

'Oh, I don't know! I do hear things, or I think them, and I lie awake at night, and seem as if I saw it all.'

'And grow thin, and pale, and wretched, when you ought to be getting rosy, and brown, and hearty, like your cousins. Oh, child, child, child, you are well called Dorothy! You are exactly like your mother.'

What a child she always was for making herself miserable over imaginary troubles.'

Dolly did not catch the whole of this sentence, but she heard her mother's name spoken in tones that seemed to show that her grandfather was no longer angry. There was something of relief in the very fact of having spoken out the terrible thoughts that had grown upon her of late. If grandfather did not share her fears, surely it must be because the danger did not seem as imminent to him as to her. He *could* not be quite indifferent where her sweet mother was concerned, even though he might be a hard man, and have been offended with father.

The sexton here came back with a glass of water, and when Dolly had drunk it, she felt herself again, and stood up to signify her readiness to do anything that might be wished of her. Grandfather did not, however, make any attempt to go back to the church, but taking her by the hand, began pacing leisurely towards home.

At first he was very silent, but presently he began asking questions in a jerky, abrupt sort of way. These questions led gradually round to the subject of the parish, and of father's and mother's work there, and little by little Dolly's tongue was unloosed, and she began talking about the dear, familiar scenes and people, almost forgetting that her listener was none other than the redoubtable grandfather, of whom she had hitherto stood in such awe.

CHAPTER X

THE CAVES BY THE SEA

No immediate result appeared to follow from this little episode of Dolly's walk with grandfather. For two or three days she and Patty indulged a faint hope that he might perhaps make some trifling advance, pay them a little visit in the schoolroom, or join them for a few moments when they were playing in the garden, and he was walking on the terrace within sound of their voices. But no such thing as that happened; they saw no more of him than they had done before; and it did not seem as though their vague hope of gaining the old man's heart were ever to be fulfilled.

But one morning a letter came from mother, containing a piece of very welcome news. Two excellent nurses had suddenly arrived in the parish, sent down by some institution, for the purpose of helping to take care of the poor, sick people. Who had really sent them, and who bore the expense, was so far a secret. The nurses knew nothing about it themselves, and father and mother were quite at fault. However, Sister Mona and Sister Mary, as they were called, were already proving worth their weight in gold. They were lodged at the Rectory, as the most con-

venient centre, and the relief to the hard-worked clergyman and his wife was greater than can easily be imagined.

'The kind sisters take care of us, as well as of the parish,' wrote mother. 'Father was sent to bed yesterday evening at eight o'clock and only woke up two hours ago, and calls himself a "giant refreshed." We shall do famously now, with all the kind help that has come; but we are much puzzled to know who our kind friends can be.'

'I believe it is the Bishop,' cried Letty. 'You know how kind he always was.'

But a little pink flush stole into Dolly's pale face, she squeezed Patty's hand tightly in hers, and presently found a chance to whisper quietly to her:

'Don't you think that perhaps it might be grandfather?'

Patty did think so. The idea had occurred to both little girls, and made them very happy. For if it were to be so, it would surely show that grandfather *did* really care for their parents, though he might be hard and harsh in his ways.

'I feel quite sure it was he,' she said, after a time. 'He asked so many questions, and said more than once that there ought to be a parish nurse at such a time.'

The cousins were pleased about it too. Since Letty's talkative tongue had wagged so often and so freely about the parish and the affairs there, the whole party had gradually come to take an interest in the matter, and to ask for news when the children received a letter from home. Hilda had openly said that 'Aunt Dorothy

and Uncle Rose' ought to come to Tarnside for a good rest and change, after all that they had done during the time of sickness, and hoped that mamma would ask them, when they were able to get away. She also said more than once that it was so stupid not to know your own relations, and that for her part she thought it all very ridiculous. 'As though everybody had not the right to please themselves!'

By which rather obscure sentences Patty and Dolly became aware that their cousins knew the reason of the estrangement, though they never spoke on the subject.

Hilda's birthday was just approaching, and great discussions were going on as to how it was to be spent.

It seemed that birthdays were kept as high days in that family, and almost unbounded indulgence granted to the children for the keeping of such festivals. All kinds of projects were under discussion, but the one that in the end found the most favour was a picnic to a wild and romantic valley, some ten miles away, where they could spend the day and enjoy unbounded freedom.

'It's such a jolly place,' cried Judy, capering about, and getting Letty into a corner to describe the charms of the spot; 'it's quite near the sea—at least, a little bit of the sea comes rushing up into a place near. It is called the "Devil's Kitchen." I will take you to see it. The spray comes dashing up just like smoke, and it is for all the world as if something were being cooked inside. It is such a nice place, and there are caves and things, only one can't always get in because of the tide. But we'll have a try: I do want to see the places. The boys have often been in; Chi says they are awfully

weird and jolly. Oh, I wish I were a boy! It is such a bore to be always told you can't do this and can't do that because you're a girl. It's all nonsense, too. I can do just as much as a boy, and I believe you could, too.'

Letty felt flattered, though by no means certain whither her companion's words tended.

On another occasion, nearer to the day, Judy returned to the charge, and getting Letty into a corner, asked her if she could keep a secret.

'Of course I can if I try.'

'Well, if you can, I don't mind trusting you. Punch and I have got a lovely plan, and if you like you may join in it, only it is to be a great secret.'

Letty's eyes glowed: like most children, she dearly loved a secret.

'Well, I'll tell you, because we want you to join, for the more there are the easier it will be. We are going to have a private expedition of our own to the caves in the Devil's Kitchen, and you may come with us if you like.'

Letty liked very much. She had heard enough by this time of the wonderful caves to be very wishful to see them; but she did not know why there should be any secrecy about the visit.

'Hector and Chi are going, and so is Hilda, I think,' she said; 'so why shouldn't we all go together?'

'Because they won't take us. The boys are so tiresome to Punch and me. They always think we shall be in the way, and can't do the things they do, though I know we could really. You'll see for yourself—it's always the way—we are left out of all the best of the fun; but if Hilda can do it, we can.'

‘Has Hilda been before?’

‘Oh, no; we haven’t been to Tarnside at all for a good bit. But she’s going this time. Chi will take her anywhere, now she has been down the rapids in his canoe. I know I could do that too, only he won’t let me. It is such a bore always being the youngest. One gets nothing but snubs. I wish people could take turns of being eldest and youngest—it would be much fairer.’

‘I’m the youngest, but I don’t mind. Nobody snubs me, as you call it.’

‘No, you are different, you children; but never mind that now. You will come with us to the caves, won’t you?’

‘Yes, of course I will; we *may* go, I suppose?’

Judy coloured up a little, and answered hastily:

‘Oh, of course we may—nobody has ever told us not. It’s only because the boys are so tiresome that we keep it a secret. They will say we are to stay and boil the kettle, or something of that kind, if we let out about it; and Jessie is so fond of laying down the law and pretending we are to obey her, whenever mamma is not there. So you must not say a word to anybody, but just come quietly away with us when the time comes.’

‘But mayn’t Patty or Dolly know? Perhaps they would like to come too.’

Judy’s face took quite a cross look.

‘I declare, you tiresome child, you will spoil everything if you are such a baby as to be blabbing it all about. You know Dolly would be frightened to death, and Patty does not care a bit for scrambles, and would only be in the way, and if she went Dolly would think she

must go too, and we should never get any way with such a tag-rag-and-bobtail. Why did you say you could keep a secret, if you must go and chatter about it to everyone?’

‘I don’t want to chatter to everyone; you needn’t be so cross, Judy. I won’t say a word if you don’t wish. I only thought it might be nice——’

‘Well, don’t think any more; it wouldn’t be nice at all. All the fun of a secret is having it to one’s self. We three shall make a capital party, and we want nobody else, and we’ll have all the things ready that we want, so as to go comfortably; and then shan’t we be able to crow over those cheeky boys, who think nobody can do anything without them?’

Letty was quite willing to agree to this. She had not the least suspicion of anything wrong. It never occurred to her for a moment that any of her cousins would do anything that they knew would be disapproved of by their parents, and keep the matter a secret lest it should come to their ears and be forbidden by them. But as a matter of fact the daring and ignorant Judy was planning an escapade that would never have been permitted by the authorities; for the caves she proposed visiting in that haphazard way were exceedingly dangerous, except at certain states of the tide; and unless any person fully understood this, an exploring party might be washed away by a treacherous eddy, or imprisoned for hours in the dark till the tide fell again. Chi was well acquainted with the caves, for once after an illness he had been sent to a farmhouse in the neighbourhood for several months, and had there made himself master of the whole matter,

and he was a boy who did not forget, and who had too much shrewd common-sense and presence of mind either to run into danger heedlessly or to lose his head upon an emergency. He was trusted to do a good many things that would not be considered safe for all lads of his age ; and as his brothers and sisters saw this, they not unnaturally imagined that the dangers they heard spoken of from time to time were more imaginary than real.

So Punch and Judy set their hearts on a private expedition to these caves, and Letty was ready enough to join. She did not even know that there was any danger worse than slipping over rocks, and splashing into a pool, and the twins took care that she should not be farther enlightened, for they wanted her company, as there would be lights to carry, and difficult places to be got over, and they suspected that three would prove a better number than two.

The day of this long-planned expedition dawned bright and clear. The picnic party breakfasted early, and by nine o'clock all was in readiness for a start.

The array of pretty presents for the queen of the day had been a source of wondering astonishment to the three little sisters, and they felt half ashamed of their own small contribution--a little netted purse, which they had themselves made for her. But Hilda had been very nice, and had seemed as much pleased with it as with anything.

'Most people just give things out of shops,' she said, 'and of course it's very kind : but it is nice sometimes to get something that has been made on purpose for one. I think it makes it feel more one's very own.'

And then she had put it in her pocket, with grandfather's sovereign tucked away in it — grandfather always made his birthday present in money, and it was welcomed as being a very convenient kind of present — saying that money might come in useful when they were out if anything were to happen.

There was a great waggonette at the door to take the party, and the parents came out to wish them a happy day, and to give Hilda her birthday greetings. The only charges laid upon them were to take care of themselves, and to be back before dark, and they drove off in great spirits ; for they were sure of having a most delightful day.

The drive was a long one, but it was enjoyed by the whole party, and particularly by the three little visitors, to whom driving was quite a new pleasure. The scenery was very wild and beautiful, and grew more wild as they neared their destination. The woods became fewer, the heathery slopes were more steep and more interspersed with rocky patches, and, save for the brilliant sunshine lighting it all up, there would have been something almost savage in the lonely scene before them.

The road, which had been rising steadily for some time, passed at length through a narrow cleft between two great masses of rock, and the party found itself at the head of a narrow valley, down which the road wound steeply, till it was shut off from view by another natural gateway similar to the one through which they had just passed. When they had driven through that, they saw before them a valley smaller than the last, and of a cup-like shape, where wild

flowers were growing in some profusion, and where there was a small wood of silver birches, surrounding the remains of an old ruined tower.

This was their destination. The carriage was driven as near to the ruin as might be, and the groom who had driven them carried the heavy hampers of provisions as near as he could to the spot. Then he drove away to rest his horses and feed both them and himself at the nearest inn, about a mile away, and arranged to come back in the evening to fetch his young charges home.

It really was delightful being all alone in that little green valley, with nothing to do all day but explore and amuse themselves. It was so new an experience to Letty that she was almost wild with delight, and ran about like a sprite, until the party was reminded by their ravenous appetites that noon was past.

The opening of the hampers showed that the cook had done her share in contributing to the success of the birthday party. Such an array of good things the little sisters had seldom seen in all their lives before. As Letty said, with a sigh of satisfaction, it *was* rather nice, for a change, to be rich, though it would be nicer still to be able to share all the good things with the parish.

Everyone laughed at that, and Hector observed that the parish was to Letty something like a horse-leech, or his daughter, at which she looked rather indignant, but was soothed by Hilda's rejoinder :

'Well, I won't have the child teased. I think it might be much better for us if we had something to be interested in like the parish, instead of always spending everything on ourselves, and not bothering about

other people. I'll tell you what, Letty: I'll give you my grandpapa's sovereign, and you shall spend it on the parish. I think we are old enough to help other people with our money. I should hate to grow up a horrid selfish pig.'

And Hilda forthwith opened her purse, and threw the gold coin into the lap of the astonished Letty.

'Bravo, Hilda! let's have a collection,' shouted Chi; 'a collection for Letty's parish!' and a half-crown was spun across to the impromptu collecting bag, followed by several more coins of various magnitude; and whilst Letty was gathering them and handing them over to the safe-keeping of Patty—and the eyes of the three little girls were shining with delighted gratitude—Hector cried out:

'We'll make them stump up at home too. I know they will, for they were talking about the fever there at dinner the other night, and wondering if something ought not to be done for the place. Oh yes, we'll start a subscription list, and make the governor shell out in style. Won't that be a lark? I like seeing Sir Marmaduke's name down in lists for good thumping sums.'

And if, perhaps, Hector's generous feelings might have had a higher tone, at least they were kindly meant and genuine enough. He might like to feel something of the reflected glory of his father's liberality, but at all events that was better than complete indifference, and an advance on what he would probably have felt a month or two back.

'Some day I suppose you will be Sir Hector,' remarked Letty presently, when the tumult of pleasure

and gratitude had subsided ; ' I should think you would do a great deal of good then. Why weren't you called Marmaduke? I thought a baronet always called his eldest son after him. And there have been quite a great many Sir Marmadukes already, for mother has told us so. I think you ought to have been called Marmaduke, too.'

This remark, innocently as it was made, produced a dead and somewhat uncomfortable silence. Chi tried to mend matters by beginning to talk very fast about something else, but it was some minutes before things seemed quite right again, and Letty was much perplexed to know what she could possibly have said amiss. Perhaps her cousins did not like to think about what could not happen till their father died, but surely they must have known that nothing unkind was meant. They often talked themselves of what they would do when they were old, and what they should be able to do with their money when they had it, and they never meant anything unfeeling. All children plan out the future without pausing to realize the things that must happen before these same dreams can come true.

However, the meal was pretty well over by this time, and the party rose and separated. Hector, Hilda, and Chi started for their walk to the Devil's Kitchen, which lay about half a mile away, just beyond the next ridge. Jessie got out her sketch-book and colour-box and asked Patty if she would sit to her by-and-by, as she should want a figure for her foreground. Patty, much flattered, was delighted to wait upon her, and watch how the sketch grew under the well-trained fingers.

Dolly set to work to gather flowers, some of which she meant to take home and press for her mother's collection, as she felt sure she had not got them all, whilst the three younger children—the twins and Letty—began playing about, and gradually drew away from the others without exciting remark.

Indeed, Dolly was lost to sight first, for her rambles took her in the wake of the party that had already started for the coast, and she was not without a wish to see the strange spot of which she had heard so much, provided she could look at it quietly from a discreet distance, without being expected to clamber about, or to go into any caves or dark places, for of such spots Dolly had a wholesome horror.

Presently she reached the ridge of rocks that shut in the valley, and heard below her a sound of mighty roaring. She was half afraid to pursue her way, but curiosity and a knowledge of her own perfect safety induced her to go on, and presently she was rewarded by coming into full view of the vast caldron lying a couple of hundred feet below. The opening to the sea could not be seen save in the form of a shaft of greenish light that slanted in between two perpendicular rocky walls. But the great basin was filled with seething green water, that rushed round and round till it actually seemed to boil, and dashed itself upward in a mist of spray and foam.

The child had seen nothing like it in her life, and stood watching in amazement and awe. Far below her she saw the figures of her cousins picking their way between great boulders towards the yawning mouth of the great cave. There was another such

mouth on the opposite side of the caldron, but whether the caverns communicated with one another she did not know. She only wondered, with a sort of shudder, how anybody *could* venture into such a terrible place. Even from where she stood the angry roar of the water almost frightened her. What it must be like down there she could not guess.

Soon after the party had disappeared into the cave Letty came up with Punch and Judy, all three looking somewhat excited and full of importance. Dolly told them into which cave the exploring party had gone, and presently Judy said that they would go down and see the kitchen a little nearer, but advised Dolly not to come, as she was subject to giddiness and might slip and hurt herself.

Dolly had not the smallest desire to go, and only wished Letty would not be so daring; but Letty always did manage to hold her own and get off scot-free from any peril, and she was as much bent on going as her older companions.

'Come along,' cried Judy, as soon as they were out of ear-shot. 'It's jolly we know which way the others have gone—now we will steer clear of them. I wanted to see the little cave most. I believe it's the queerest, really. If they come in by and by and find us there, what a lark it will be! Won't the boys be sold? we shall show them we can do things just as well as they.'

The scramble down was difficult, but delightful. Letty, despite her short acquaintance with rocks, was able to accomplish the descent as easily as her companions. She was sure of foot, steady of nerve, and as light as a mountain doe. Before very long they

were actually at the mouth of the cave, peering curiously into its dim recesses.

The roar of the water in the great caldron close at hand prevented much speech, but what they saw drew them on step by step. A little expanse of sand lay in the mouth of the cave, and a boat was lying there, moored to a ring high up in the smooth rocky wall.

Neither the presence of the boat nor the appearance of the cave's mouth told anything to the inexperienced children. They were delighted with everything, and eagerly lighted their little lantern, and thus, ensured against darkness, they proceeded cautiously along the sandy floor, till they found themselves in a lofty hall, from the sides and roof of which hung sparkling stalactites of all kinds of fantastic forms.

The ground, which had dipped a little, rose presently, and became damp and slippery. The walls narrowed, and resembled a sort of gallery, through which the wondering and delighted children reached a second large hall, even more curious than the one they had left. There was nothing so very peculiar, however, in these ocean-worn caves as to merit a lengthy description. They were such as may be seen in many places along the wild parts of the coast of our island, only they were new to these children, and proportionately fascinating. There was not the smallest fear of losing the way. There were none of the ramifications that make some caverns dangerous. All was plain and straightforward enough, and except that there were many slippery places to be got over, and many sharp ridges of rock to be traversed, it was all easy work, so easy that Punch and Judy uttered many contemptuous

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snorts, and made various disparaging remarks as to the conceit and *uppishness* of elder brothers and sisters, who were so mighty proud of doing what their juniors could do equally well.

The cave was altogether too fascinating to be quickly hurried through, and the party was by no means tired of it, when Letty exclaimed that she was standing in a pool, and the next minute a great green wave came booming in and raced round them, wetting them all over their shoe tops.

‘Oh, the nasty thing!’ cried Judy, laughing; ‘I wonder how it got in here. Oh, and here comes another. We must get up on to that ledge a minute out of their way. I did not know water ever came in here.’

The children were not immediately alarmed. It had not yet occurred to them what this sudden rush of water meant. They got up on to one of the many ridges of rock that projected from the side of the cave, and waited, as they hoped, for the abatement of this unwelcome flow of water.

It was Letty who seemed first to awaken to what was really meant by the breaking of these big green waves upon the floor of this inner cave. She had seen the incoming tide once or twice upon her native sandy flats, and had heard of the strength with which it had, in bygone days, swept away the walls and dykes reared up to break its fury. As she watched the beautiful crested waves rolling in through the gaping mouth of their vault-like cavern, she looked up suddenly, and exclaimed:

‘Why, Judy, how silly we are! It isn’t any good

waiting. The tide is rising, that is what it is. It was low water, I suppose, when we came in, and now it has begun to flow. We must run out as quick as we can, or we shall be shut up here ever so long.'

'But how can we get out? it's water everywhere,' said Punch, looking rather rueful and foolish, but not yet frightened, for the cave was light from a fissure in the roof, and the play of the big waves was very pretty to watch.

'Why, we must take off our shoes and stockings and wade, of course,' cried Letty, proceeding to suit the action to the words. 'I expect we shall get wet as it is, but sea-water never gives cold, people say. Come along, Judy, don't waste time; the water can't be very deep yet. We'll soon be out.'

There was something of a terrified look on Judy's face as she began to obey the energetic Letty. She remembered having heard a good deal of talk at one time or another of the danger of these caves, and the way the tide came swirling in. She had ignored all this as 'rubbish' before, when set upon her own way; but it came back to her now with a thrill of dismay, and she only wished she could share Letty's happy confidence.

Punch was boldly paddling along, laughing heartily at the way in which the water washed up his bare legs every time a wave came dashing in. Letty followed, rather puzzled to know how it was that the water seemed so deep, for in the sea-side place where she had once spent a week, the tide used to rise inch by inch, so very slowly that it seemed quite ridiculous to think it could have got a bit high in the little time they had been in the cave.

But as the path dipped down towards the entrance of one of the passages, Punch suddenly staggered, and was nearly washed off his legs by the swirl of the deepening water, and Letty, who was following, had to run back quickly, or she would have been overwhelmed altogether. Judy seized her by the hand, and they all three ran hastily back to the friendly shelf that seemed the only place of safety.

Then it was that the real peril they were in burst upon the minds of the children. Here they were shut out from the world above, in this dark, grave-like place, with the cold, cruel waves rushing in higher and higher every moment, whilst not a soul in the world—unless possibly Dolly—knew where they were, and she would not know that they were in any danger, and perhaps she had gone away before they had gone into the cave. It was not likely that an alarm would be raised until tea-time, and long before that, so far as the children could judge, the water would be washing over the very ledge on which they were now standing.

Punch gave way altogether and sobbed bitterly. Judy stood watching the waves with staring eyes and a ghastly look upon her generally merry face. Letty neither cried nor shrank back from the sight before them, but stood with a look of awe on her little face, her thoughts more of her parents than herself even at that moment. She was too young, perhaps, to realize the peril and all it meant, even though she might possibly understand it. At any rate she was calm, and when her companions were both crying bitterly, she put her arms round Judy's neck, and whispered :

‘Don’t cry and be so frightened. You know Jesus is here too. He can take care of us as well here as at home. I don’t think He will let us die here. I think He will send somebody to us. Shall we ask Him to?’

And then the three children knelt down together, and the twins, almost for the first time, lifted their hearts in real prayer.

CHAPTER XI

DOLLY TO THE RESCUE

DOLLY, left alone in her rocky niche above the curious natural gorge, had sat down to rest and arrange her flowers, and to watch with some interest and curiosity the movements of her bolder companions. She saw them presently disappear into the cavern-like hole, but she did not suppose they had gone into the cave itself, as she had heard of the caves being places only fit for boys, and knew that Hilda's going had been considered something of a special privilege.

She knew nothing about the configuration of the rocks, and thought her companions might at any moment appear in view. She supposed they were scrambling about somewhere out of sight, and was not at all uneasy, save that she felt as if she should be happier if she could have seen them, or heard their voices. But Dolly was so used to her timid fears, that she did not make a real trouble of them. She had found by experience that people always did turn up safe and sound, even when they seemed to be in the most danger, and though she decided not to go back to the ruin until Letty had returned, she did not make herself miserable about the long time she was gone,

but sat patiently waiting till the sound of the water, after the fatigue of the long morning's driving and play, caused a sort of drowsiness to come over her, and she presently dropped off into a doze in her nest amid the tall grasses.

She was aroused by the sound of voices quite close to her, though the speakers themselves were hidden by a projecting rock.

'Are there not some caves down there? Could we not go into one of them?'

'Yes, there are caves, I know, but I doubt if we could get a guide. There are some fisher-fellows about sometimes; but visitors seldom come, and I expect everyone is busy harvesting just now,' was the answer in a man's voice.

'Oh, but couldn't we go without a guide?'

'Well, I don't think the game is worth the candle. I've been here before, and there's nothing so very remarkable. The big cave to the right is very rough walking, and one wants lights and things, and that smaller one opposite can only be approached on foot at low water, and I can see it would be no good to try it now: the water is flowing in fast.'

'Is there no boat?'

'There may be one, I dare say; but I shouldn't care to try and navigate it. Just listen how the waves roar in the holes all round. One wants to know what one is about before one ventures into places like that.'

Just then there came an impatient call from below.

'Elsie—Frank—what are you doing up there? Do make haste. We must be getting on, or we shall miss our train.'

‘There, you see we have no time,’ said the man’s voice, and the sound of hastening footsteps, quickly dying away, told Dolly that she was once more alone.

When the visitors had gone, she began to think of what they had said. Whilst they had been talking it had not occurred to her that their words could mean anything to her, but all of a sudden a great fear crept over her, and she dropped her flowers and stood up, her face full of terror.

What if Letty and the twins had gone into the little cave, and the water had come in, and stopped their getting out?

Dolly remembered quite well that she had seen them disappear into the yawning mouth some time ago, when the ground under their feet was nice white sand. Now it was all water where they had been standing before, and the waves were breaking in with a great splash and roar, and it was easy to understand that if they had gone in, they could not possibly get out now. Perhaps——

But Dolly would not allow herself to go on thinking. As it was, the terrible possibility almost unnerved her. She stood quite still, her small hands pressed closely together, her little pale face setting itself into lines of wonderful resolution for one so timid and weak. ‘There is only me,’ said Dolly to herself, ‘only me. I must save them if I can.’

And then in that hour of need a new spirit seemed to awake within the child. Was it the soldier blood in her that was stirred to action? or was it that after all, behind that crust of nervous timidity and finely-strung sensibilities, there lay some of the indomitable

courage and energy of her race, unsuspected and unknown even to those who knew her best? Be that as it might, there came a new sense of power to the solitary little girl. She felt that, for the sake of those she loved, she would walk into the very jaws of death. But what could she do?

Jessie and Patty were half a mile away at least, and even if they were here, what help could they give? No; it was the boys, and the boys only, who could really be of service in this emergency; and how was she to find them?

If she waited till they came out of the large cave, it might perhaps be too late. The tide was coming in with a rapidity that startled the child, now that she was roused to note it. Waiting might be fatal. The only thing to do, as it seemed to her, was to follow them into the cave, to shout till she made them hear, and bring them back to daylight again.

It was, indeed, like walking into the very jaws of death to the timid, nervous child; but though her face was very white, and her lips were pressed tightly together as if to still their quivering, she did not hesitate, but scrambled quickly down the rough path, and walked in under the dark vault as steadily as a soldier walks up to the mouth of a cannon.

How terrible it looked, that great silent cavern! It was light near the entrance, but as she walked on and on the light grew fainter and fainter, and only a few sickly gleams stealing in through fissures in the rocks far above saved it from total obscurity. Though no one would ever dream of visiting the cave without a torch, it was just possible to direct the steps without

artificial light, on account of the fissures and rents high up overhead. But what might not be the lurking horrors in those black recesses which opened on every side? And what could be the meaning of all the terrible and ghastly noises that awoke the echoes from time to time, reverberating along the rocky walls, and setting the child's pulses racing so fast that she could hardly draw her breath?

How many, many times did she not look back to the glimmer of daylight and feel as if she *must* run away out of this terrible place, or lose her senses with fright! But though her spirit shrank, and her limbs sometimes almost refused their office, the will remained firm, and the thought of Letty and her companions, shut up by the cruel waves in a place as dark as this, and perhaps even more dreadful, braced her to renewed efforts, though the walking became so difficult that the child almost despaired of getting much farther.

The noises she heard were sometimes caused by the waves outside, sometimes the echoes of the voices of the very people of whom she was in search. But they sounded so little human, booming through the rocky passages, that it was no wonder she did not guess what they were, and was filled with chill terror.

She tried to call, but her tongue was so heavy and her throat so dry that only a faint little cry was the result—so faint and tremulous that there was no chance of its being heard at any distance, and the only thing was to try and struggle on and reach the others if she could.

The light was almost gone by this time. Dolly seemed alone in the very heart of the earth, in almost

pitchy blackness, tired out, faint with fear, and suffering untold things, both on her own account, and still more on behalf of those other prisoners in the opposite cave.

And just then, in the darkness, and upon the slippery rocks over which she was picking her way, she tripped and slipped, and fell with her foot jammed and twisted between two stones that held it fast, whilst her whole weight fell forward. A shrill cry woke the echoes of the place, and then there was deathlike silence, broken presently by a little movement and a gasping sound. Dolly had tried to move, and the effort was attended by such pain that it had forced another cry from her.

But what was that noise not so very far away? Was it an answer? It sounded like a hail from one of the boys' voices, and even in the midst of her faintness and pain Dolly felt a thrill of thankful relief, and gathering up all her strength, shouted back in a thin little voice, which nevertheless seemed to reach the ears it was meant for.

'Coming!' was the welcome shout that went rolling on through the dark passages, and by-and-by came another call—

'Where are you?'

'Here!' Dolly tried to say, but there was so little voice that she was not certain if anyone heard it. But lights were beginning to appear in the distance, and presently she saw Chi coming forward in advance of the others, looking about as if in search of something.

'Anyone fooling round here?' he asked, holding his torch on high. 'Any of you youngsters come in to try and frighten us, eh?'

'I'm here, Chi,' answered a little faint voice out of the very ground, as it seemed. 'I came after you to tell you something. Please come here.'

'Why, it's Dolly, I do declare!' cried Chi in unfeigned astonishment. 'Dolly here, and all alone! Why, whatever is the matter, little one? You've hurt yourself.'

'Yes, but that doesn't matter; I can wait. I came to tell you about Punch and Judy and Letty. They've gone into the other cave, and the water has come in, and I think they can't get out. And do please go and help them soon. Suppose they were to be drowned!'

Chi uttered a startled exclamation and asked a few quick questions, which were answered quite clearly enough to make him fully alive to what had happened.

'The little fools!' he cried angrily. 'It is all that Judy, I'll be bound. I'll give it her well when we have them safe out. No, no, Dolly, you needn't be frightened. They will be safe enough for another hour or more: there are plenty of places they could scramble up, to keep out of the way of the water till it gets much higher than it is now. We'll get to them long before any harm can happen to them. But what are we to do with you? Where are you hurt? Did you fall down? Is it your foot?'

'I think so, but please don't trouble about me—I'll stay here till you can come back. Please go to the others. They must be so frightened in there with the water all coming in—please go.'

'Serve them right if they are—little baggages—they had no business to go there at all. And as for being frightened—I should think you were the one most to

be pitied. You must have been pretty frightened coming here in the dark. Aren't you the one who never likes caves at any time ?'

'I don't like them much, but it's silly to be afraid, and I had to come—there was nobody else. But do please go.'

'All right—look here, Hec ; you and I must go in the boat to some of the youngsters who have got themselves shut up in the other cave in a trap. Hilda, you stay here with Dolly, and get her out if you can ; but if she has hurt her foot, as I'm afraid she has, you had better wait till we come back, and we'll carry her. For the ground is precious rough.'

The boys hurried away, for though, in order to allay Dolly's anxiety, Chi spoke as if there were no hurry, he was anxious to lose no time, as he knew that the tide came in very rapidly, and he was not sure how far his small brother and sister were to be trusted for finding the best places to keep out of its way. They had a talent for making their way out of scrapes as well as into them : but the present was one that might prove unusually serious.

Whilst the two big boys hurried away, Hilda heard from Dolly the history of her afternoon, and though she said little, she felt a good deal of admiration and respect for the child, who had put her fears aside, and acted so bravely and sensibly in order to save the others from the consequences of their folly. She had, in common with her brothers and sisters, held Dolly in some good-humoured contempt for her timidity, and now she could hardly believe that the child could have so far conquered herself as to do a thing that Hilda was conscious

even she would only attempt under considerable pressure. There was something very ghostly about going into a dark cave quite alone, and she was really impressed with the courage the little one had evinced.

‘You are a capital child,’ she said, in so warm a tone that it made Dolly blush with pleasure in the darkness. ‘I don’t like to think what might have happened if you had been a little goose, and had run back to the others instead of coming to find us, as lots of children would have done. I hope you have not hurt yourself really. But these rocks are horridly slippery, and you had no light. Do you think you could walk if you tried?’

‘I don’t think I could,’ answered Dolly, whose foot felt all on fire, though she had almost forgotten the pain in the relief of having found her cousins. ‘I think I shall have to stay here till the boys can get back, but don’t you stay too, if you don’t want to.’

‘As if I should leave you alone!’ cried Hilda; and Dolly was very grateful, for a sort of numbness was stealing over her, and she wondered if she could be going to die. She could hardly see Hilda’s face for the dimness before her eyes, and the sound of her voice seemed to be a very long way off.

As for Hilda, she soon began to suspect that Dolly was more hurt than any of them had believed at first. The child made no complaint, but Hilda soon found that she was sinking into unconsciousness, and growing frightened, she leaned over her, and tried to put her into a more comfortable position. That finished the business altogether, for at the first movement of the little wedged foot Dolly gave a gasp and fainted altogether, and Hilda, now thoroughly frightened, could

only hold her head upon her knee, and sit waiting for the boys to come back.

This they did pretty soon, laughing and talking and in good spirits, for having found the prisoners all safe and sound, though in a state of considerable alarm and anxiety, and having relieved their minds by a good fraternal 'skying,' they felt themselves again, and were quite disposed to make a heroine of the once-despised Dolly; for both boys were very well aware that the day might have had a tragic ending but for her sound sense and promptitude.

There was some little consternation when they discovered her state, and still more when, on reaching the open air with their burden, they saw the deadly whiteness of the little face and the unnatural look about the foot. Chi, who was always ready of resource, at once set to work to cut off the boot and bathe the swollen member in cold sea-water, binding it carefully up afterwards in improvised splints. Then they carried her up the rocky path, at the top of which the younger children were waiting.

Hilda's birthday picnic seemed likely to end badly, but the elders of the party put a brave face on the casualty, told the frightened children to 'shut up, and not make more trouble than they had done already,' and carried Dolly safely to the rendezvous, where the efforts of Patty and Jessie soon brought her back to her senses.

It was a great comfort to all when Dolly opened her eyes, and looked round for Letty in a way that told she remembered everything. So long as she lay still where she had been placed, wrapped in one of the

carriage rugs, and her foot comfortably supported as Chi had directed, she felt almost well, and was able to talk and tell all about the occurrences of the afternoon to the eager group around her. She felt very shy at all the praise she got, and wished the boys would not make such a fuss about her, though it was very kind of them; but it was so nice to be lying there in the sunshine, with Letty, still looking a little pale and grave, holding her hand and looking lovingly into her face, that she felt more than rewarded for the effort she had made, and was not at all troubled about her foot, which hardly ached at all now.

Chi was much more disturbed about that foot than anybody else. He had a delicacy of touch and the instinct that often accompanies sensitive fingers like his, and he had not at all liked the feel of the swollen member as he had bound it up, nor the grating sound he had heard as he had put it into a more natural position. He felt sure that a doctor ought to see it as soon as possible, and whilst the rest were busy boiling the kettle and making the tea, he set off for the inn where the carriage was, and ordered the man to put to a full hour before the time previously arranged.

He was back again, however, by tea-time, and the meal proceeded with a tolerable show of festivity, though the brightness of the morning had gone. The twins were so wonderfully subdued as to be barely recognisable, and Letty was unwontedly serious, though not weighed down by any feeling of guiltiness, for she had been quite innocent of conscious wrong-doing. She only wished she could talk it all over with mother, and tell her how good God had been in hearing their

prayer. To the child's simple mind, the rescue had come as a direct answer to prayer, and she felt a sort of exaltation of gratitude that she wanted to share with the mother who always understood so well, and entered into all her children's feelings.

Nobody was sorry when the carriage came, except poor little Dolly, who found it very hard work to keep back her tears when she was moved, and who found the motion of wheels so trying to her foot that it seemed as if she would almost have to be left behind on the way. But at last clever Chi managed, by the aid of shawls and cords, to get her swung between the seats of the waggonette in a sort of hammock, and this so lessened the jar that she was able to bear the movement better; and though the tears would come, and the poor little face looked pitifully white and exhausted, the journey was managed at last as well as could be expected.

It was the dinner-hour at Tarnside when the carriage drove up, but some whisper of an alarming character must have reached the dining-room, for, to the great surprise of the children, Aunt Hilda and grandfather both came out to see what was the matter, which was certainly very unusual when they had company in the house.

Dolly was now the first object with everybody. The boys were talking one against the other at the top of their voices, trying to make known the story before anyone had attention to give to it. The twins were shrinking into the background, decidedly ashamed of themselves, yet too curious to absent themselves from the scene of action. Hilda and Jessie were trying to

persuade Dolly to let herself be lifted out, and she was so frightened and worn out and ill that her self-control had broken down altogether, and she only held Patty tightly by the hand, and sobbed out an entreaty that people would go away and leave her to herself. She was so dazed and bewildered that she did not appear to know where she was. The only thing she wanted was to be let alone.

It was altogether a curious scene—the carriage drawn up at the great door, the crowd of figures flitting about in the dusk, and the strange hubbub of tongues. Aunt Hilda was quite bewildered, and knew not which way to turn, and if grandfather had not come to the rescue, it seemed as if they might have gone on like that all night. But Chi had been talking to the grandfather quietly a little on one side, and now there was heard the sound of an authoritative voice which always enforced prompt obedience.

‘Out of the way, all of you! What do you mean by all this noise? Jessie, get down. What are you all doing up there? Make way, Hilda, and you too, child, whoever you are.’ And as everybody obeyed, scattering right and left like a flock of sheep, the stern old man, of whom the whole household stood in awe, mounted himself into the carriage and bent over the weeping Dolly.

Her sisters thought that this would be the last drop in her cup, and that there would be more tears than ever; but they had not quite got to the bottom of their timid little sister’s nature, for, to the surprise of all, the sobs suddenly ceased, and there came a weak little voice out of the darkness.

‘Is that you, grandfather? Oh, please will you take care of me? Oh, please don’t let them hurt me! I will be good; but please do let me be quiet.’

‘Nobody shall touch you except me, my dear,’ said grandfather’s voice, not tenderly, yet with a sound in it that seemed to give the child confidence and satisfaction. ‘Nobody shall bother you but me, and I will be as quiet as I can. Now will you let me lift you?’

And Dolly held out her arms to him with perfect trust, and it was by grandfather himself that she was carried in doors and upstairs, holding back with all her might the moans of pain that she could not quite check.

‘She’ll be all right now,’ said Chi, drawing a long breath of relief, and turning encouragingly to the two little sisters. ‘Grandfather was once a doctor himself, when he was a young man, though he didn’t practise long. He has always kept up his science, and he’s awfully good with broken bones or anything like that. He can doctor an animal as well as any fellow living, and Dolly ’ll be as safe as anything now he’s got her in hand.’

CHAPTER XII

THE TARNSIDE MYSTERY

DOLLY's foot proved to be rather badly hurt, though not beyond the grandfather's skill, which was fortunate, as doctors were difficult to get hold of in that place, and had always long distances to come. The child was also somewhat low and ill in herself for a good many days, owing partly to the injury and partly to the chill taken from lying so long in the damp, cold cave. Her nerves had likewise received a shock, and complete quiet was ordered for her. She lay in a darkened room, and except Patty and grandfather she saw hardly anybody.

'Don't let mother be told,' had been the child's first petition. 'She can't leave father and the parish, and it would only make her unhappy,' and as Dolly had never wanted mother more in the course of her little life, and could not help crying because she was so far away, her request showed a great measure of quiet unselfishness, and was appreciated by one person who heard it, though he made no remark.

However, it was decided that it would be better and kinder to say very little to Mrs. Rose about the accident—nothing to arouse her anxiety. She had quite enough

on her mind as it was, and there was not anything in the child's state to cause alarm, though it would be a month or more before she would be able to walk again.

Things seemed different in the house after that picnic party and its misadventure. Dolly was shut up in the big room where grandfather had first carried her—one of the guest-chambers in the main block of the house, and Patty was in close attendance upon her. Then, as there was illness in the house, and more work for the schoolroom-servants in consequence, it was thought a good plan to send Hector and Chi and Hilda to pay a long promised visit to some young friends at a house not very far distant, and so it came about that Letty and the twins found themselves in full possession of the west wing, for of course Jessie now spent her time almost entirely with her mother and the guests.

Letty was rather subdued, as were also the usually irrepressible Punch and Judy, by the peril they themselves had been in, and by the consequences their foolhardiness had entailed upon Dolly. But Letty had relieved her mind by a long and detailed account of the affair to mother, who had quite forgiven her for her unconscious wrong-doing, only warning her not to be led thoughtlessly into anything which seemed like deception, though a few childish secrets were harmless enough, and little people always enjoyed them. She was glad to learn that her little daughter had not forgotten to pray to God when danger had seemed near, and altogether Letty had been so relieved and consoled by the letter that she was her own merry self again, quite ready to join her companions in any amusement

they might like to set on foot. Her visits to Dolly did not take up much time, for she was not needed in the sick-room, and the quieter the little patient was kept the better she seemed, so the three children were left practically to their own devices, and began to look about in search of new diversion.

It was at this time that Letty woke up to the fact that there were two unsolved puzzles still to be made out. One concerned the locked rooms between their wing and the gateway, and another the history of the strange young man she had seen one morning in the wood. More than once had the child stolen off by herself to the little hut, but though traces of occupation were not wanting, she had never seen the occupant again. She could not get out so early in the morning now, as they hardly ever woke up before dressing-time, and she supposed he did not dare to come out later in the day. She had a theory that he lived in a cave, and only ventured into the light of day when the rest of the world was asleep; but she was unable to find anything out for fear of betraying him, and the fir-wood was not a favourite haunt of her cousins. They much preferred the lake, or the banks of the stream which fed it, where Chi was often to be seen figuring away in his canoe, and performing all kinds of wonderful feats.

Now, however, seemed the time for giving her mind to these perplexing questions, which had of late been thrust into the background of her thoughts; and as children, unless too timid to enjoy it, dearly love a little mystery, Letty was quite in spirits at the idea of ferreting out her secrets, and only hesitated as to whether or not she should ask Judy anything about

the shut-up rooms, before making an effort to penetrate within them.

On the whole, she decided that she would, because there might have been a prohibition from head-quarters, which had not reached her ears, forbidding entrance into those regions, and Letty was a very conscientious little maiden, and had no desire to disobey rules in order to gratify her curiosity.

It was a wet afternoon, and they were playing romping games together in the corridor, when Letty, looking out into the grassy court-yard in an interval for breathing and rest, remarked innocently :

‘ I have never been in that funny old room over the gate. It looks such a nice, queer place. Have you ever been inside ?’

‘ Oh yes, sometimes ; but there isn’t anything to see, and the old people are generally cross to us.’

‘ Does anybody live there, then ?’

‘ Oh yes ; an old man and his wife—pensioners, you know, who have got past work. They live up there, and have a small wage, and don’t do anything. But they are not at all nice. They don’t like people coming to see them, so we never go now.’

Letty began to think that her mystery was about to shrink into very insignificant proportions, but still it was a satisfaction to get it cleared up, and so she added eagerly :

‘ Oh, then that is why we hear noises behind those doors ! We have wondered so often who could be there.’

Punch and Judy exchanged glances and said nothing.

‘ Is it because they are cross that the doors are

always locked?' asked Letty eagerly. 'I've often tried if I could get in, but I never could. Have you ever been this way?'

'Oh, that's not the way to the rooms over the gateway,' said Judy, glancing at Punch as if some secret understanding existed between them. 'The old people don't live there.'

'Then who does?' asked Letty, feeling more and more sure by Judy's manner that there was something odd about the whole thing; and when the answer came it was to the full as mysterious as she could have desired.

'I don't know—nobody talks about it. I believe that they are haunted.'

'Haunted! What, by a real live ghost?' cried Letty in an excited under-tone, drawing nearer to where Judy stood. 'I didn't know there were any ghosts now. I thought they were extinct—isn't that what they call it when things don't come any more?'

'I don't know about being extinct; but I do know that there is something in those rooms, something alive, and as I don't see how it can be a proper person, I think it must be a sort of ghost, unless it's a monster or a bogey,' Judy warmed with her subject, and though the three children huddled close up together, thrilling over the subject with a kind of fascinated fear, they were all deeply interested, and would not have thanked anyone for robbing them of their mystery.

'But doesn't *anybody* know?' asked Letty, quivering with excitement.

'I believe the elder ones know something, but they don't tell us. I know Jessie was very glad

to get out of that room you have. She didn't say why, but I know she didn't like being so near the haunted wing.'

'But—but—if the ghost would hurt anybody, Aunt Hilda would not let anybody sleep there, surely?'

'Oh, I don't suppose there is anything to hurt; but there is something *uncanny* about it all, and Punch and I have often wanted to find it out, only there is no chance when the rest are always about, and last time we were frightened—we were too little to do anything. I'm not frightened now—at least, not in the day. I'd rather not go in at night.'

'But may we go in?—may we try and find out? Haven't you ever been told not to?'

'No, never. Once, long ago—it must have been six years or more, for Punch and I were quite tinies: it was the first time I can remember coming here at all—mamma told us that those rooms were locked up because they had belonged to the big brother who was dead, and so papa did not want them to be used any more, at least for a time. We never thought anything about it then; and I don't think they were haunted, either, but the ghost has come since, and I want to know who it is.'

But something else had struck Letty as of even greater interest than the ghost.

'Did you have another brother who died?—I didn't know that—do tell me about him!'

Judy looked a little puzzled.

'I don't know if I can. He wasn't our brother exactly—a half-brother people sometimes called him. I can just remember him. He was a big, dark, thin boy, and

he didn't live with us: I suppose he was at school. He came sometimes for a little while; but I don't think it was very nice when he did.' Judy wrinkled her brow in the effort to remember and understand. 'Then there came a time when mamma cried, and there was a great fuss, and by-and-by we all wore black frocks, because Brother Duke was dead, and that's all I know, and his rooms have always been kept locked up ever since; and so I suppose a ghost has come into them. Sometimes I wonder if it is *his* ghost.'

A little shiver passed through all the children, and then Letty, who had been lost in thought, asked suddenly: 'Why don't you ask Aunt Hilda about it? I should think she would know.'

But such a simple, straightforward way out of a difficulty did not appeal to the other children, who had not grown up to the habit of carrying every thought and every difficulty to their mother for discussion or solution.

'Mamma does not like talking about Brother Duke,' said Punch, with an air of decision.

'Nobody does, for that matter,' added Judy; 'I think he did something very wicked once. They never talked of him after there was all the fuss and he died. Once when I was quite little, I asked about it, but nobody would ever say a word, not even old nurse, who generally told us everything.'

This was all so very interesting that Letty almost forgot to think about the ghost.

'Fancy having a brother, and never talking about him! How funny it seems. I shouldn't like dead people I cared for to be forgotten like that.'

'I don't think anyone did care for him very much,' answered the practical Judy; 'I know he had a very bad temper, and gave a great deal of trouble. I believe he hated all of us.'

'Oh, Judy! how can you say so?—your own brother.'

'Well, don't you see, he wasn't exactly a brother. He was papa's son before he married mamma. Mamma was his step-mother, you see, and he hated her—you know in books they always do. I don't quite understand why, but people did not want us to know, so they never liked us to talk about it.'

'And what was he like?—do you remember him? I think it is all so very romantic.'

'I can show you who he was like,' cried Judy, regardless of grammar. 'They used always to say so, and I suppose he was, though I don't remember well enough to know. Come along; everybody is out driving to that old bazaar, or else playing billiards. We shan't be a moment, and nobody will see us; besides, I shouldn't much care if they did.' It isn't naughty.'

And forthwith she led her companions through the doors which led into the main building; and making a dash along the big corridor, and down a spiral staircase, she emerged panting and breathless into a big hall-like room with a great many windows and a boarded floor, on the walls of which were hung a great number of full-length portraits.

'This is the picture-gallery and ball-room,' said Judy; whilst Letty gazed round with wide-open eyes, for she had never seen such a room before. 'Come along and see the picture. It's in this corner, and of course it's older than Brother Duke was when he died, and it's

got a different dress ; but it was supposed to be so very like him that it will show you what he was like.'

Letty came and stood before the canvas, and hardly restrained a little startled cry, for the face in the picture seemed an exact counterpart of the melancholy dark countenance she had seen in the wood : the features were almost identical, and even the expression was the same.

Her companions were not observing her, so her start of astonishment passed unheeded ; but as she stood there she felt that the plot was thickening in an unexpected and most mysterious way, and she did not know in the least what to make of the strange discovery.

'Come along,' cried Punch, who had a wholesome dread of being caught by some upper servant trespassing into forbidden regions—they were more in awe of the servants than of their parents—'we've seen it now, and had best get out of this. I don't see that it helps us to find out about the ghost. It would be more sense to get some of the old keys out of the attic, and try if we can't get one that fits the door.'

Letty's face put on a look approaching terror.

'Oh ! but ought you to do that ?'


'Nobody told us not.'

'But if they keep the door locked isn't it almost the same as if they told us not to go there ?'

Punch and Judy both looked impatient.

'I told you she would be no good,' said the latter scornfully. 'I knew she would be afraid.'

'I'm not afraid,' asserted Letty stoutly ; 'at least, not in the way you think. I want to know all about it quite as much as you do—perhaps more.'



‘Then why did you say we oughtn’t to try the keys? It would be much the easiest way.’

‘I should ask Aunt Hilda first.’

‘That would just spoil all the fun.’

‘It never spoils the fun to tell mother things.’

‘Oh, you’re such a baby! We don’t go on in that ridiculous tell-tale way.’

Plainly there was going to be one of the easily provoked quarrels of which Letty had seen so many, and in which she had so often shared. A sharp retort was on the tip of her tongue, but she held it back, for it suddenly occurred to her that mother would be very grieved to have her name made, as it were, the cause of a quarrel. They were back in the nursery by this time, and quite in the mood to prosecute their researches. Talking of the mystery had whetted their curiosity, and if ever they were to penetrate into those closed rooms, now was their opportunity, in the absence of their elders.

‘Let’s go up to the attic and see if we can’t find some of those old keys,’ said Punch; ‘I know we once saw a whole pile up there. Anyhow, there are lots of queer old things to turn over, and we are allowed to play up there and to take what we like. It’s all rubbish.’

Letty had never been up to the attic before, and, as she wished to be as conciliatory as possible, she made no objection to following her cousins there, though she still hoped that the plan of the keys might be given up.

Certainly, the idea that the rooms were the hiding-place of her friend of the wood did much to change Letty’s ideas as to the advisability of invading his

retreat. It was all very mysterious, and rather terrible, for it almost seemed as if this young man must be the Brother Duke who was mourned as dead, and never spoken of on account of some sad deed he had committed. Altogether it was dreadfully puzzling, and the child felt half afraid to take another step, lest some unexpected harm should be done. She had passed her word to him not to speak of their meeting, and she would keep it at all costs. Yet if he were really in danger of discovery from the curiosity of the twins, might it not be kind to give him timely warning? For Letty's romantic little head was stuffed full of notions of dangers of quite an unknown kind, and her half-formed suspicion that he was in some mysterious fashion the wicked son, who was supposed to be dead, did not lessen her apprehension on his account.

How he came to such a place she did not profess to know, nor did it occur to her as an impossibility that he should be living there unknown to the whole world. She quite believed herself to be the only person possessed of the clue to his whereabouts, and she became filled with an ardent desire to warn him of his possible peril, and, if she could do so, assist him in his flight.

So whilst the twins were sorting out keys, and turning over the piles of rubbish and odds and ends with which the attic was stored, Letty sat enthroned on a heap of bedding, turning many plans over in her mind, and wondering how she could possibly get speech of the lonely young man before his sanctuary was invaded.

To her relief she saw that Punch and Judy were more interested in some antiquated toys they had rummaged

out than in the question of the keys, and entering into the discussion as to the use of some of the curious articles about, she drew their minds away from the immediate pursuit of their object, and though a basket of keys was brought down, no attempt was made to try them that night.

Letty still could not think what her course was to be; but as she turned the matter over and over in her mind a light seemed to break in upon her. Certainly the plan was a daring one, and would need a good deal of courage in the carrying out; but Letty hoped and believed that she would dare to make the attempt when the hour came, and she waited for bedtime with almost feverish impatience.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PANELLED CHAMBER

DARKNESS and silence had fallen upon the house. Lights were out in all the windows round the quadrangle—save one. And that one was in the very room which Letty had promised herself to enter that same night, provided that all went as she had planned.

So, despite the lateness of the hour, and the silence of the big house, the child was wide awake, and not even undressed. She had not got into bed at all, lest she should fall asleep, and so lose her opportunity. And now the very moment for her bold attempt had come, and though she felt some natural timidity, and her limbs trembled as she stole from her room, there was no shrinking in her heart. If there were danger menacing one who had once trusted her, she would not let him go unwarned.

She stole from the shelter of her room, and first listening intently at all the doors of the occupied rooms in the passage, to be certain that everyone was sleeping, she stole on tip-toe to those other closed doors, behind which she had never yet penetrated.

The moon came stealing in through the windows, and gave her light to see by, and she was almost

certain, too, that a faint streak of light struggled under the baize doors also.

And as she was standing beside those doors, hesitating before taking the final plunge, there came a sweet, low, vibrating sound, plaintive and sad, like the music of the breeze in a pine wood, and these low, sobbing sounds were followed by others so strange and sweet, that Letty felt a species of enchantment growing upon her, none the less fascinating because it thrilled all her pulses with something like fear.

The child felt that if she did not act quickly she was in danger of missing her opportunity altogether. It was so strange and ghostly, listening to fairy music in this pale, flickering moonlight, that she was half afraid it was all a dream, and roused herself to action in order to make sure.

Taking hold of the handle of the door, she rattled at it with all her might, tapping at the same time upon the panels, and making as much noise as she dared.

The first answering sound that made her think her demonstrations had been heard from within was a fierce growl, followed by an angry bay, muffled a good deal by the heavy doors, but still distinctly audible to the listening child. Presently she became certain that the dog was sniffing at the other side of the door, repeating the sounds of displeasure and suspicion, and breaking out each time that she knocked into a bark or bay, that seemed at last to attract the notice of the inhabitant of the mysterious rooms, for the sounds of music (if music it was) suddenly ceased, and Letty thought she heard the approach of slow, steady footsteps.

Her heart beat rather fast, but she stood her ground. She expected to be challenged and parleyed with, and perhaps angrily bidden to go away before the door was opened ; but, instead of this, she was sure by the sound that the bolts were being slowly withdrawn, and the key turned. The door opened a little way, and a voice asked in low, languid tones :

‘ Is that you, sir ? Are you in the dark ? ’

‘ Please, it’s me,’ answered Letty, stepping forward where a patch of moonlight fell upon her small figure ; ‘ I’ve come to warn you. I’m afraid you are in danger.’

The figure of the young man of the fir-wood (for she knew by his voice that it was he) was wrapped in deep shadow, for there was no light in the corridor behind him. After the child had spoken there was a pause of silence, and then the recluse spoke in a voice that betrayed great surprise :

‘ You here, child ? Why, whatever is the matter ? ’

‘ I came to warn you,’ said Letty again.

‘ Come in then, and let me hear all about it,’ said the voice, after what seemed like a moment of hesitation. ‘ But a mite like you ought to have been in bed long ago.’

‘ I sat up—I wanted to wait till they were all asleep,’ answered Letty, a little perplexed by the cool matter-of-fact tone adopted by this strange young man. He did not seem half as much excited or moved by this secret visit as she had expected. She began to be more and more perplexed as to what it could all mean. Still, her curiosity was only whetted by what she heard, and following the retiring footsteps of her guide, she

soon found herself in a large, pleasant, old-fashioned room, panelled in oak, which was fitted up with considerable taste and luxury, as if for the use of an invalid. There were numerous couches and easy-chairs, books filled the recesses, and lay about in profusion on the tables. There was a grand piano, heaped with music, open in one corner, and a violin lay upon the top, as if put down as the musician crossed to the door. A small inner bed-chamber was visible through a curtained doorway in an opposite corner, and, summer though it was, a fire of logs burnt on the hearth. Altogether, Letty thought it was a very attractive retreat, but still she was utterly at a loss to know how her friend of the wood came here, and whether his presence was or was not a deadly secret.

‘Sit down, little girl—isn’t Letty your name?’ said the young man, stretching himself wearily on a couch, and clasping his hands behind his head, whilst his brows drew together as if he were in pain. ‘I suppose I ought to send you back to your bed; but as you are here, and as there doesn’t seem much chance of any sleep for me to-night, you may as well stay and amuse me. Why did you tell me the other day that you lived ever so far away? Did you think I shouldn’t find you out?’

‘I did think it was a long way off. I only found out a long time afterwards that we were so near home. But—but—I don’t understand. Do you live here—in this house? You didn’t tell me so. I thought you lived in a cave or something.’

‘You see, we were playing a game of cross purposes.’

We neither of us knew who the other was. But we are wiser now.'

'I don't think I am—unless—unless you are the Marmaduke they all think dead.'

The young man started and looked surprised.

'Who think that I am dead?'

'Punch and Judy—they told me so. I thought everybody thought so; and that you were hiding away, because—perhaps—you had done something wrong,' stammered Letty, half afraid of the sombre light that began to awake in his eyes.

'Punch and Judy—the little twins? Oh!' was the slowly-spoken reply. 'Then she has kept her promise all these years—I never thought she would.'

Letty sat silent, staring with ever-increasing bewilderment.

'Do the others ever speak of me?' he asked suddenly.

'The others? Why, the others don't know anything about you—nobody does but me. Only Punch and Judy declared that there was a ghost or something shut up here, and were going to get keys and come and find out. And when, from different things, I thought it must be you, I thought I must come and warn you. I thought you were in hiding.'

The young man looked languidly amused, despite his sombre aspect.

'Oh, I did not know there was so much margin for romance. What put such an idea into your head?'

'Why, you almost told me so yourself—you made me promise not to say a word.'

'Ah, true, so I did. I didn't want a whole rabble of

children down upon me. I hate to be bothered and stared at. And so you spun a romance about me, eh? Pity you could not find a better object. There is precious little romance in this quarter.'

'I think there is a great deal. I can't think who you can be, living all alone here, and nobody knowing about you.'

'Only, unfortunately, everybody does know—so there flies away the best part of your romance.'

'Everybody?' gasped Letty.

'Everybody except those twins, who, it seems, have not yet been introduced to the family skeleton.'

'The what?'

'Well, the eldest son and heir, if you like it better,' was the bitter reply. 'The hope of his father's heart, who has been such a credit to the family.'

'What do you mean?' asked Letty, who was beginning to get half frightened, though still consumed with curiosity.

He looked at her steadily and reflectively out of his deep-sunk eyes, as if debating some point with himself.

'I wonder if I had better amuse myself and you by telling you the whole story. Of course you wouldn't understand the half; but, by all accounts, you are wonderfully wise little people. Would you be able to keep awake by the aid of hot coffee under the infliction? And would you have patience for a long yarn?'

Letty had never felt more wide awake in all her life, and the idea of a story fascinated her to the utmost. The strong coffee pressed upon her, and partaken of by her host, was not much to her taste, though she sipped it

out of politeness, whilst he lay back upon his couch, and fixed his eyes upon the ceiling. He forgot sometimes that he had only a child for his listener, but Letty gave such resolute attention to the tale, and had been so well used to listen to the conversation of grown-up people, that she understood more than was expected, though she had to think a great deal about it afterwards to be able to adjust matters to her satisfaction. It was all so very strange at first that it was hard to believe it true.

‘I am Marmaduke Tremain, eldest son of the family, and in my boyhood I was an only child, and made a sort of idol of by my parents, or, in plain words, I was spoiled to the top of my bent. Nothing was too good for me, and I was quite convinced that the whole world was created for my especial delectation. I never knew a trouble till my mother died when I was eight, and I suppose I must have been differently constituted from some children, for I was never able to forget her, and my grief was as fresh at the end of two years as it was in the first week—or I thought it was, which comes very much to the same thing. And so, when I heard that my father was going to marry again, my fury knew no bounds, and I swore I would never speak to my step-mother, or be under one roof with her—in fact, I was so violent and so self-willed that no attempt was made to coerce me. I was left here with my tutor and nurse, as I had been, on and off, since my mother’s death, when my father had elected to travel about a good deal, and I never for years went near the house in Ravensthorpe where my father established himself, or saw my step-mother at all.’

‘Is Aunt Hilda your step-mother?’ asked Letty, anxious to understand it all as clearly as possible.

‘Yes, and I believe now that she was always kindly disposed towards me, and would have liked to have me with them and try to win my love; but I never believed that then. My mind was poisoned, and I was ready to believe anything that was said against her. My old nurse and her husband, who live in the tower over the gate and wait upon me, and have always been greatly attached to me, detested the new marriage as much as I did, and they stuffed my head full of all kinds of nonsense about step-mothers. I believe they thought they were acting for my good, and placed full belief themselves in what they said; yet one can see now that they were very foolish, and let their jealousy of me, and their fondness of keeping me with them, drive them to great lengths. They actually made me believe, when Hector was born, that my father would try to make him the heir of the baronetcy, and that he and my step-mother between them would oust me from my rightful position. I was silly enough to believe it all—and I do believe they did the same, though they really might have known better; but the hatred I felt of my parents grew on unchecked—for by this time I hated my father, too—until I was practically almost an outcast from the family.’

‘Oh dear, oh dear,’ said Letty, ‘how very sad!’

‘Well, I suppose it was, but I did not think so then. I was very proud of my strong will and insubordination, and so things went on till I went to school. There I got a little sense knocked into me, and some of my uppishness knocked out. I saw I had been an ass to

think I could be ousted from my position by any younger brother, and I began to have a glimmering that my father had been remarkably forbearing with me, instead of showing himself the tyrant I loved to call him. In plain words, I learned sufficient sense to see that I was behaving ridiculously, and so at last I began to go home for the holidays, instead of moping all my time away up here.

‘Well, I don’t know exactly how it was, but I never could get on at home. Your aunt was kind enough, and things were arranged to suit my convenience, but I suppose from growing up alone, and being made into a little king, I had not learned how to get on in a family. Anyway, I didn’t get on; I made the whole house uncomfortable, and sometimes drew down rebukes from my father. That always made me furious, and I began to get morbid ideas again, and think that everyone wished me dead; and when once one begins to cherish thoughts like that, there is no end to them, or to the mischief they may do.’

‘That is what mother would say, I am sure,’ said Letty to herself.

‘Well, so things went on till I left school, and then I was in a fever to enter the army. It was not that I had really any natural bent that way, but that some of my favourite companions were going into the service, and I was all eagerness to be with them still. My father opposed my wish. He knew I was much more fitted for a college career, and he wanted me to go to Oxford, which had, until a few months before, been my own wish and favourite ambition. Your aunt did not think me strong enough for the army, and opposed my

entering it on that account. Unluckily I heard that she was "backing my father," as I called it, and I was furious. I traced her hand in the disputes that followed, and I spoke my mind plainly about her "interference," and though they were both, I believe, much more patient and good-tempered than most people would have been, I was told at last that if I did not behave better, I could not remain an inmate beneath my father's roof, and arrangements were made to send me to a tutor's.

'That was the last straw—being expelled from my own home—for so I persisted in calling it, that a pack of half-brothers and sisters should take the place that should have been mine. I vowed I would not stand it; and I did not, for I ran away from home, when I was supposed to be going to my tutor's, enlisted as a private soldier, and was drafted almost at once out to India.'

'Oh!' cried Letty in wondering amazement; 'what *did* they say to that?'

'They did not even know. I had laid my plans carefully, and got several days' start, for it was nearly a week before they ascertained that I had never arrived at the tutor's. By that time all trace of me was lost—I had taken good care of that. I had enlisted under a false name, and was soon on the high seas. I let a false report of my death reach them, which they believed in default of any tidings, and I cherished every kind of bitter thought, believing that they all rejoiced in my death, and that my step-mother was triumphing in the knowledge that her son was now the heir to the baronetcy and the estate.'

‘Oh, how could you think such a dreadful thing?’

‘Was it so dreadful after all, little one? What more natural, if she did feel so? Human nature is the same all the world over, and a woman’s own children must come first. I’m sure I don’t blame her. I will not stand in her way longer than I can help.’

But Letty did not hear or understand; she was intent on another thought.

‘And how did you like being a soldier? Did you fight in a lot of battles? Was it very dreadful? Did you get wounded? Is that why you are lame? Father was once an officer, so I am always interested in soldier-stories.’

A dark shadow had gathered over Marmaduke’s brow.

‘I’m afraid you are doomed to disappointment if you expect soldier-stories from me, Letty. The less I think about those years of my life, the better I shall be pleased. Let the writers of books, whose aim and object seems to be to paint in glorious colours the results of such escapades as mine, settle the matter with their own consciences if they can. I can only say I should like to cast them all adrift in similar fashion, and let them see for themselves what such life is like. Never mind the details. I was not perhaps the best specimen of humanity to be placed in a position where unquestioning obedience is the sum and substance of life, and insubordination punished in a way you would not like to hear described. Suffice it to say, that I underwent every kind of misery and humiliation, and lived the life of a dog for a period that then seemed endless. But all through my hopeless wretchedness my pride sustained me, and I never once allowed a

whisper to escape me that could by any chance disclose my identity to my comrades. I had cut adrift entirely from my home and kindred, and I believed that death alone could ever set me free from the life I was enduring.

‘I suppose I was not as strong as I believed myself: your aunt was apparently right in her estimate of me; though I was a strapping young fellow to look at in those days, not much like what I am now. The hardships and privations and frequent punishments I went through did not have a beneficial effect upon me, and I began to think that the end was not very far off, when a new lease of life seemed given to me, for we were ordered off to active service in Egypt.

‘The voyage set me up, and the excitement of fighting did more for me. I had at the last some compensation for all I had endured, before that shell shattered my leg.’

‘Then you *were* wounded!’ cried Letty, half in admiration, half in commiseration.

‘The pity was I was not done for altogether; but I seem born to exist through every kind of misery. After two months of hospital out there I was invalided home, as the only chance of saving a life not worth the cost of the transit. I was taken to Netley, and was there a long time; and it so chanced that before I was out of bed the Bishop of Avonminster happened to pay a visit to the soldiers.’

‘Oh!’ interrupted Letty, in sudden excitement, ‘I’m sure that’s the name of our kind Bishop. Oh, do go on—do tell me what he did! Did he know you? and did he take you home?’

‘He knew me—more by the likeness to a family portrait than by anything else—though I had met him from time to time in the years now long gone by. Well, I tried to get him to keep my secret ; but he managed to get the better of me, and at last I consented that he should tell my father. I was weak and ill, and it seemed very doubtful if I should ever leave my bed, and, of course, a fellow is at a disadvantage under such circumstances. So the end of it all was that, though the doctors gave no hope of my recovering or being good for anything again, they managed to cart me down here to the house, which was almost always empty, and here I have been ever since with a diseased bone and a shattered constitution for my companions, and here I suppose I shall be till the end of the chapter—and the sooner the end comes the better it will be for everyone.’ The last words were lost in a long heavy sigh that went to the child’s heart.

But Letty did not know how to attempt to offer consolation to this proud, strange cousin, whose history sounded as if it had come out of a romance, though to him, poor fellow, there had been little enough of the romantic element in it. She waited a moment till the very heavy shadow had passed, and then asked, with childish eagerness and curiosity :

‘But why are you such a secret ? Why do people go on thinking you are dead ?’

The wan face coloured a little beneath its dusky pallor.

‘I don’t know if I can make you understand—you are such a simple little piece of goods. Don’t you see that after I had been years and years away from home,

supposed to be dead, and letting my own people believe it too, and going on in the way that I had done, it was rather too much of a humiliation to turn up again like a bad halfpenny, setting the whole house topsy-turvy, and altering Hector's prospects and everything? Besides, the doctors said there was no chance of recovery—they all agreed to that—though my father had a dozen of the biggest swells London could produce to try and get a favourable opinion out of one of them. I was in a queer state just then, and they had to let me have my own way, and I would only consent to be moved at all on the condition that they took me straight back to my old rooms here, and left me there with my old servants, and that nobody was told that I was alive—not even my half-brothers and sisters.'

'Oh dear, how strange it seems.'

'Yes, rather mad, was it not? But I was so convinced I should die the next winter that I really believed I should get my own way, and that nobody would ever know; but instead of that I got better, and in the summer—that was three years ago now—they all came down, and I saw some of the elder ones; but still I kept my rooms, and insisted that the world should not be told of my existence, and that the little ones should not know it either, in case they should let it out. I only want to be left in peace. I suppose the end must come before very long, as there is what the doctors call "progressive mischief" at work still, only it is so unconscionably slow in its progress. I have been at death's door again and again, yet I have so far always pulled through, and so they decided at last on

another consultation ; and the verdict was that though I was incurable, and my days were practically numbered, such seclusion and loneliness were prejudicial, and that is why you are all down here this year—that I may have the benefit of a little congenial society and see fresh faces.'

The sarcastic inflection in the voice puzzled Letty ; but then so did the whole state of affairs.

' So you see I live in state here, and receive visitors in the evenings, though there is, I am glad to know, still a sort of fiction of keeping the secret, though it must be worn rather threadbare by this time. I suppose the whole family is rather ashamed of the recovered black sheep, and certainly it is awkward to speak out now. In this solitary place, however, there is little fear of arousing inquiry—there are no neighbours to ask inconvenient questions.'

Letty was growing sleepy in the midst of her bewilderment. The effort to follow this long history had had its natural effect upon her. Marmaduke seemed to see this.

' And now, you daring little ghost-hunter, you had better go to bed and to sleep,' he said in a lighter tone. ' I'm not sorry you came, as I have heard plenty about you, and seen you from the windows too, and recognised my little visitor of the wood. I suppose the secret can be kept no longer now from those precious twins ; they will ferret it out, as you did, now that they are on the watch. You had better let them try their keys to-morrow. I will not draw the bolts, and we will let them find their ghost with a vengeance, and something more than they bargained for.'

CHAPTER XIV

BROTHER DUKE

‘BROTHER DUKE!’

It was such an astonishing climax to the exciting search, that the twins stood silent and aghast, hardly knowing whether they were asleep or awake, or whether they had not unearthed a more real ghost than ever their wildest imaginings had led them to believe in.

Letty stood demurely beside them, her eyes dancing with amusement at the bewildered astonishment of the twins. Naturally the whole thing seemed less strange to her than to the others, who had worn black long ago for the vanished brother, and who had heard his death spoken of as a long-past event. To the twins the surprise was overpowering; and though they accepted it after the first few minutes of bewilderment with the ready adaptability of childhood, they were immensely excited, and quite disposed to make a tremendous hero of the newly-recovered brother.

Indeed, he was not let off without giving a much more detailed account of his years of absence than he had done to Letty. The reason why he had ‘run away’ was hardly touched upon—indeed, the children

seemed to want neither rhyme nor reason for it—the fact was enough for them, and Punch was lost in admiration.

Letty was delighted to listen to everything Duke liked to tell. It was very funny to be actually inside these mysterious rooms, listening to stories from their lonely occupant; but it was all very fascinating, and this cousin was no less a hero in her eyes than in those of his half-brother and sister. She only wished her sisters were there too.

‘Oh, doesn’t it sound nice?’ cried Judy. ‘I do so like to hear about it! If I were a boy I think I would run away and be a soldier too! I wonder if Punch will one day—only if he does it will be so dull at home for me.’

Punch looked more dubious. He had been fascinated enough by the narrative, but all the same he had a latent perception that he was better off at home, and that it was pleasanter to sit and hear about such things than to have practical experience of them. Duke seemed to read this thought, for he looked at the little boy with his sombre smile, and said:

‘Punch is not such a fool—he knows when he is well off.’

‘And didn’t you?’ asked Judy eagerly. ‘You were bigger than Punch when you ran away!’

‘The cases are not parallel, and never can be,’ answered Duke, with a touch of sternness in his face. ‘You cannot understand—perhaps you never will.’

Letty had noticed that to her small cousins Duke said not a word about his hostility towards their mother, who was not his mother, and she had thought it was

very nice of him to keep silence on the subject, though it had made his story less clear. The twins, however, were quite satisfied when they had heard what he had to tell, and all they now wanted to know was how soon Brother Duke meant to emerge from his seclusion.

‘Because, as everybody in the house knows about you now, you might just as well live with us. It would be such fun. And it must be so jolly dull shut up here all the time.’

But Duke’s face grew dark.

‘I shall never do that,’ he said shortly. ‘I did not know that everyone had not been told before you all came here this last time. That makes no difference.’

‘But I don’t understand,’ persisted Judy; ‘if you are well enough to see people, and to go out into the woods sometimes, why aren’t you well enough to come downstairs too?’

‘I never said I was not well enough.’

‘But of course there can’t be any other reason. Nobody stays always shut up who can get about, and when the visitors have all gone you couldn’t mind coming down.’

There was no answer of any kind, only a hard look upon the dark face that Letty did not like to see. She felt half afraid of this strong-willed, resolute cousin of hers, who, whilst so freely confessing much that was wrong in his past, seemed to be cherishing the very feelings that had led him to act so wildly.

‘How old are you?’ asked Punch suddenly.

‘Twenty-eight,’ was the reply, ‘though I feel much more like a hundred.’

‘I suppose you are old enough to do as you like,

then. But I hope you won't always go on shutting yourself up. It is much more fun to go about and see people. Do you see everybody up here? Do they all come—papa and mamma and everybody?’

‘Your brothers and sisters have sometimes been, since they knew I was here, and father comes up most evenings,’ and there Duke stopped, and no one said anything for a few minutes; it began to dawn on all the children that there was something unfathomable in all this.

Punch and Judy presently edged a little away, and began to examine the room and its contents, gradually withdrawing themselves till they were out of earshot in the passage beyond; but Letty kept her seat by the invalid's couch, for she felt a great compassion and tenderness towards him, hardly in keeping with her years. There was an element in it beyond her own power of analysis—a sense of the intense sadness of such a wasted life.

And then he looked so ill and worn. The way in which he closed his eyes and heaved a great sigh when he fancied himself alone went to her heart. She could not help getting up and laying her soft little hand upon his brow. Possibly it was the first caress he had received for years, for his eyes opened with a look of startled surprise.

‘Your head is so hot, and you look so tired,’ she said, with an air of womanly concern quaintly like her mother's, upon whom it was no doubt modelled. ‘Does your leg hurt you very much, or is anything else the matter?’

‘Nothing, or everything; it comes pretty much to

the same thing, I think,' he answered wearily, letting her stroke his burning brow with her gentle fingers, and closing his eyes again, as if in a sort of languid enjoyment. 'I am never out of pain, little cousin, so you must forgive me if I am bearish sometimes; and when one has had a sleepless night or two as well, it seems sometimes as if one had reached the limit of endurance. If one had anything to live for, it might be different; but when one only longs for it all to be over, it is the very irony of fate to have to go through what would have killed nine men out of ten long ago. But there, you cannot understand. I've no business to talk so to a mere child.'

'But I like you to talk to me,' answered Letty; 'and, you know, I am accustomed to sick people, because of the parish. I am so very, very sorry for you. I wish I could bear the pain for you, and let you get a good sleep; it would do you so much good.'

His eyes unclosed, and he looked at her with a more gentle expression than she had ever before seen on his face. He did not speak, but something in the look gave her courage. He evidently did not mind her, and she went on talking in a way that might have sounded unnatural in some children, but was with Letty the outcome of her training, and an evidence of her perfect simplicity and good faith.

'Do you mean you want to die and go away to heaven? I know ill people often do want that, especially when they love Jesus very much; but mother always says that they can show their love best by being patient and waiting His time. She says that is like helping Him to bear His Cross.'

There was not the ghost of a response. The dark-rimmed eyes kept themselves fast shut, the face looked as if carved in marble. Letty thought with compassion that she had seldom seen anyone look so ill and worn and weary, and she longed to be able to do something for him.

‘I wish mother was here,’ she said with a little sigh. ‘She always knows just what to say to sick people. They all say she does them more good than the doctor.’

‘That might easily be,’ was the answer, spoken with languid irony; and then the dark eyes opened slowly and fixed themselves upon the child’s face. ‘What do you think your mother would say to me, Letty, if I were one of her parishioners?’

‘Oh, she would be so sorry for you, she would come every day. And if you liked it she would read to you and talk to you, but she would never bother you the least bit. I know what she would say, only I can’t tell it as she would.’

‘Can’t you try?’

‘I didn’t know if you would like it. I am only a little girl, and you are a grown-up man.’

‘And not in the parish,’ he added with a little flickering smile, as if he had heard more of that parish than the child had ever told him.

‘Oh, *that* doesn’t make any difference,’ cried she eagerly, ‘and you are a relation, you know. But then we are all relations in a way, by belonging to the same Church, you know, and being baptized into the same family. It is so nice to think of things like that.’

The answer was only such a heavy, weary sigh that the child’s heart was again filled with compassion.

‘But, dear Cousin Duke,’ she said earnestly, ‘you know Jesus is always nearest to the people who want Him most, and He loves sick people so very much. Mother always says that, and one knows it by the Bible. He never sent them away when they came to Him.’

‘But suppose they never did come—what then?’

Letty paused to think.

‘Well, you see, if they did not know any better, it was not their fault, and He would be just as sorry for them and as kind to them, for, you know, He died for the wicked as well as for the good people, and prayed for the men who were nailing Him to the cross, so we know that He must love everybody. But I don’t see how it can be quite the same for *us*. It would seem so dreadfully ungrateful not to love Him; and when we love Him we *do* go to Him, mother says, and He never sends us away.’

Not a very original statement or a very coherent one, but it set in motion a train of thought, and for a long time there was silence in the room, and the next words came apparently as the outcome of those thoughts, whatever they might be.

‘And when you have kept away all your life, and scoffed at it all, and never paid a bit of heed to anything, it’s a fine sort of thing and a grateful sort of thing to go with the fag-end of a useless—worse than wasted life, and offer that, as a way of making up a sort of peace. It’s something like the people who are fond of vowing to lead a very different kind of life, when they think they have no more life left to live.’

‘I don’t think I quite understand what you mean,’ answered Letty; ‘but, you know, it can’t ever be too

late to come to Jesus, because of the dying thief. *He* hadn't any life left to live, but Jesus forgave him just the same, and let him be with Him in Paradise. You see, it isn't as if any of us got there because we were good, or anything like that. It's because He died for us and made us God's children. We haven't to do anything but just believe Him and take Him at His word; I've heard father and mother say so often.'

'Nothing? Do you mean that it does not matter how we live?'

'Oh no, not exactly; only I'm so silly at explaining things. You see, if we do really love Him, we *can't* go on doing the things He said His servants must give up. You know, they were renounced for us in our baptism, and by-and-by we renounce them for ourselves as well. Of course, we often forget; but then He forgives us when we are sorry, and we don't go on doing them on purpose when we really love Him, because it grieves Him so.'

Letty spoke eagerly, rather surprised at the position in which she found herself, but feeling instinctively that she was meant to speak out what she had in her mind. Duke's eyes were open now, and presently he said:

'And suppose we will not give them up?'

'What?'

'Why, the pet sins that we know are forbidden, but which have become as it were part and parcel of our lives—what then?'

Letty's face was both troubled and perplexed.

'Oh, I don't know. I don't like to think about it. I suppose that really *would* keep people away. But

—but—you don't mean yourself, do you, Cousin Duke? You wouldn't be like that ?'

She spoke so anxiously and pleadingly that the young man looked at her with one of his sudden and rare smiles, which were at once so very sweet, and so unspeakably sad.

'How do you know that, little one? I have told you the story of my life. Has it left you with the impression that I am a very estimable kind of character?'

'But you are sorry—you said so yourself.'

'Is sorrow enough? Besides, how do you know that my sorrow is not purely selfish? Would not anyone be sorry, who had come to my present pass?'

Letty wrinkled up her brow in thought.

'May I say something, Cousin Duke?'

'Anything in the world, my little friend. I am past the stage for taking offence at anything.'

'I want to know—are you still angry with Aunt Hilda? And have you said that you won't ever see her? Please don't be vexed. I can't help things coming into my head——'

'And I gave you leave to speak out,' interrupted Duke, into whose cheek a sudden flush had stolen. 'And now that you have asked your question, I do not know how to answer it, for it would not be exactly true to say I was, or was not angry. Life is not quite such a simple thing to everyone as it is to you, Letty, and we are not all blessed with such singleness of vision.'

'Because, you know,' said Letty, breaking quickly in, 'I've heard father and mother often say that nothing keeps us away from God like being angry with

anybody. You know it is in the Lord's Prayer about forgiving; and if we won't—why, you see, He *can't* forgive us—it is in the parable of the debtors, you know.'

Duke's face wore a strange expression, and to Letty's ears his words were stranger still.

'It may be possible to forgive the person who has injured you, but it is a much more difficult task to forgive the person you have injured—even if the injury be only one of persistent hostility, an injury of thought, not of deed.'

But Letty was indulging a little day-dream of her own; her face looked at once very serious and very animated, and when she spoke it was with extreme earnestness, and with that straightforward singleness of purpose that was one of her most marked characteristics.

'Cousin Duke, is it really true what you have said about not getting well any more?'

'Quite true, Letty.'

'Then don't you think it would be nice to try and love everybody before you die? It seems so dreadful to go on being angry when heaven is so near,' and the child's eyes shone with a bright light. 'It would be so nice if you would be like a brother, and let us be fond of you. It seems so sad for you to be shut up here all alone. I'm sure they would all love you, and try to make you happy, if you would only let them.'

'Because they would know that I should not trouble them long—eh, Letty?' but she saw that there was a softness in his face that was belied by his words, and she knew that the face spoke more truly than the tongue.

‘You are a naughty boy to say such things,’ she said, though there was a suspicious glistening upon her lashes ; for she was a tender-hearted little maiden, and it seemed to her a very sad thing that he should be lying there suffering and weary, and without a hope of recovery. But she could not help feeling that he had brought a great part of the trouble upon himself, and she longed to see him do what little remained to him, to make amends for the sorrow suffered on his account.

‘Well, I will think about it—I have been thinking about it for years, if it comes to that, and have never made up my mind to it yet. It is hard to believe that anyone could really wish it. I thought they were kind from a sense of duty, and would vote it all a horrid nuisance ; but you are under no sense of duty to pretend you want what you don’t.’

‘I should never pretend what I didn’t want—it would be like telling a story,’ quoth Letty indignantly. ‘Cousin Duke, will you begin by coming into our rooms some day ? Nobody ever comes there now, except just ourselves, for the others are away, and Patty is always with Dolly. There is a nice sofa, and we would make you so comfortable. You could tell us stories, and we would give you some of our apples and plums and pears. We have plenty, and we would have such nice sociable times.’

Punch and Judy had come back from their round of inspection by this time, and were eager to second Letty’s invitation. They had caught the last words, and joined eagerly in the petition.

Marmaduke lay and listened, feeling as if it must all be part and parcel of a dream. His morbid fancy for

shutting himself up from all sympathy and companionship, combined with constant ill health and suffering, had brought at length with it the feeling that he was not as others were, and that there was some impenetrable barrier shutting him off from all the world, and especially from his own household. Duke had come to long in some sort for a truer reconciliation with his family than anything he had so far permitted, and yet his pride rose in arms against making the first overtures, and others were afraid to do so, knowing how worse than useless these had proved in the past.

The servants who waited upon him with jealous devotion were growing very old, and had at no time been anything of companions to him ; and now, when with slowly increasing weakness he found less and less pleasure in his music and his books, he began to feel a great longing for some human love and sympathy, for gentle hands to minister to him in the long, weary hours of pain that were growing harder and harder to bear, and tender voices about his couch, soothing him when they could do nothing more.

But he had tried to banish such thoughts, and to live as he had resolved long ago, as remote from those that bore his name as if the grave did indeed divide them. He had been yielded to by those in authority at the recommendation of the medical men, who warned them that he was in no state to be crossed, and that his days were numbered ; then when care and skill prevailed to lengthen them beyond what anyone had expected, his obstinate fancy had been increasingly difficult to cope with, and matters had been allowed to drift on very much as they would. The whole thing

was so exceedingly painful to Lady Tremain, and so unjust to her (for she had never had any but kindly feelings towards her husband's son), that discussion of, or indeed any allusion to, the matter was discouraged on principle. It was inevitable that in certain circles the step-mother had been held responsible for the sad fate of the promising youth, whom (as it was reported) her harshness had driven from his father's doors. So many things had combined to make it advisable to say as little as possible about the young man, even when he had returned to the shelter of the old home. His supposed melancholy end prevented any mention of his name by strangers, and the remote situation of Tarnside, and the taciturnity of his old attendants there, hindered the spread of rumour. So that when Marmaduke, in the loneliness imposed upon him by his own act and deed, began to hunger after the love he had once despised and cast away, he knew not how to make the first advance, pride and humility alike holding him back.

And this was pretty much the way in which matters stood, when the hands of the children unlocked the long-closed doors, and showed him as it were a way of escape. Whether or not he could bring himself to take it, was a point that could not be settled all in a moment. The habits of years are not broken easily, and though lying face to face with slowly approaching death teaches many lessons, it needed something even stronger than that to soften the heart that had been hardened by the unrestrained indulgence of an unchastened will. Sorrow is not necessarily repentance, and poor Duke Tremain had never learnt the lesson of

repentance, or the plenitude of Divine love. He was bearing his burden and fighting his battle alone, and small was the wonder if body and spirit alike seemed to faint beneath the load and the struggle.

But a brighter day was dawning—if he could but open his heart to the warmth and love waiting for him.

CHAPTER XV

THE PARISH

MEANTIME, whilst these exciting and interesting scenes were passing in the nursery wing, Dolly's quiet room was a centre for events of a less thrilling description, but which were, nevertheless, sufficiently engrossing to the people concerned.

Patty and Dolly were learning that grandfather was not the formidable being they had gathered from his own behaviour, and from the remarks of their cousins, but that he was more like the grandfather they had pictured from mother's stories, when she had told them of her own childhood, and the things that used to happen long ago in her old home.

It was not, however, all in a moment that this had become evident. When Dolly had been first carried upstairs by grandfather, she was not by any means devoid of fear, yet she felt a sort of instinctive confidence in him when everything seemed confusion and noise and tumult. But though he had been quite kind in the way he had treated her, and had made a clever and capable doctor for the poor little hurt foot, he was still abrupt in his manner, and silent in his ways, not in

the least like father or mother, or even Aunt Hilda and Uncle Marmaduke.

Dolly's ankle had been broken in her fall, though not badly, and as the bones of little folk mend very quickly, there was no reason to think she would be a prisoner for any great length of time. She did not have much pain in it after it was all set and bound up, and it was less hard work to Dolly to lie still than it would be to most children of her age.

'We shall be able to do a lot of knitting and things for the parish,' she said to Patty. 'You know mother will not have had time to get the winter things ready, now that there has been all this illness. It will have taken every bit of time, and everything else.'

There was no difficulty about getting supplies, for the very first question Aunt Hilda asked of the little patient shut up in the quiet room was:

'And now, you poor little dear, what can I get to amuse you and make the time pass quicker? Is there anything in the world that you would like to do? Patty, what does Dolly like best? Reading or games, or what? She must be amused, poor mite, laid up for all these weeks. What do you think she would like best? And what would you like yourself? For it will be almost as dull for you, if you are going to constitute yourself her companion all the time.'

Patty and Dolly exchanged glances; it seemed so funny to be pitied for being together in this nice, quiet room. They were rather enjoying it themselves, for Dolly was not strong enough for any company but her sister's, and Patty was always happiest with Dolly, and really enjoyed nursing and taking care of sick people.

However, it was very kind of Aunt Hilda to ask what they wanted, and Patty hesitatingly answered that they were both fond of knitting and crochet, and that some wool to make into shawls and comforters would be what they would most like.

Aunt Hilda seemed very much surprised that they really preferred that to new games or story-books; but then they were kept well supplied with books from their cousins' shelves, and she was only too glad to find any employment for the patient that could be carried on without injury to the poor little foot; so, in the course of a day or so, a splendid bundle of nice wool and yarn arrived, of all the colours of the rainbow, and the little sisters were so happy and busy over it, winding and arranging and sorting, that they had no time to be dull, or to be even very homesick.

Next to having mother with them, the very best thing possible was to be working for her and the people she cared for. Patty and Dolly both inherited her clever fingers and love of needlework, and it was no trouble to them to sit many hours with their knitting or crochet, whilst the pleasure of seeing the work grow hour by hour was more than compensation for a little weariness. Sometimes they would make a variety by reading aloud to one another out of some story-book, and altogether they were very happy out of the way of the tumult of a large household. Indeed, Dolly was happier than she had been ever since her arrival at Tarnside; for the big house full of strangers had oppressed her sadly, and it was almost equal penance to go downstairs to the early dinner, to be noticed and perhaps teased by Uncle Marmaduke and his guests, and to sit

at the noisy meals upstairs, where any moment a quarrel might arise.

Letty paid several visits daily to her sisters, but she was evidently very busy over some plan or project of her own, for she was unusually preoccupied, and did not take the same interest even in the supply of wool as she would have done under ordinary circumstances. She said she would help by-and-by, but seemed to be too busy to do anything at once. She looked full of mysterious importance and seemed very pleased, so they were quite happy about her, and only wondered a little what it was all about.

But the main interest of the two little sisters, shut up together in the pleasant south room, centred in grandfather. They talked about him, and thought about him in a way of which he little dreamed, and his visits to his small patient were to both children the great event of the day.

Ever since the walk she had taken with him, so soon followed by the arrival of nurses to help their parents in the parish, Dolly had felt a timid love for the formidable grandfather, that exercised a curious species of fascination over her. To many natures fear of a certain kind *is* fascinating, and both Patty and Dolly felt that their dread of the stern old man was not without elements of pleasure too.

Grandfather always paid a visit to the foot as soon as breakfast was over. He did not generally talk much, but made his inspection almost in silence, though if he had hurt his little patient at all, he had generally a grave, kind word to say to her by way of atonement; and Dolly was as brave as ever she could

be, for she would have been very sorry to forfeit grandfather's good opinion, and it was always more than compensation to hear him call her a brave little woman, and feel his hand laid for a moment on her head.

Dolly secretly thought that it was a very good thing there was no doctor within a great many miles. It was much pleasanter being looked after by grandfather, and he was quite equal to the management of the case. He was a very nice, if rather an awe-inspiring doctor, and some days he would bring a little present in his pocket to amuse his small patient, and this was generally something of his own manufacture—some little toy cut out of a cherry-stone or a peach-stone, or a whistle made out of the nob of a walking-stick, or a similar trifle that pleased the children quite as much as a costly toy would have gratified their cousins.

After the morning visit they did not generally see him again, after the first few days, till evening. But he always came in on his way up to his room to dress for dinner, and gradually, as it grew to be a little dusk at that time, he got into the way of sitting down by the fire (if there chanced to be one) or by Dolly's sofa, and letting the children talk to him, not saying much himself, but leading them on by a question now and then, and listening with silent attention to what they said.

This habit began one day soon after the wool had come, when he found them for the fifth or sixth time hard at work in the fading light, knitting away with a zeal that bespoke either great love of the work, or great interest in the object worked for.

'At it again, I do declare! What industrious children

you are! Do you never allow yourselves any holiday? What in the world are you so busy about?’

‘Oh, we like it,’ said Patty quickly; ‘and it is so kind of Aunt Hilda to give us all the wool.’

‘But what is it all for?’

‘Oh, the parish, of course—the poor people there, you know. Mother always works in the long evenings to get some warm things ready against the winter. But now she will have no time, and I expect that all the things we had ready will have gone, so we thought it would be so nice to make some more for a surprise when we go home. She will be so pleased, and if we are very industrious all the time, we shall have a whole lot of things to take.’

‘But don’t you get tired of knitting all day long? You seem to be at it from morning till night.’

‘Oh no, we do stop sometimes. I can’t do as much as Patty, because I do get tired.’

‘And doesn’t Patty get tired, too?’

The little girl hesitated.

‘I’m afraid I do sometimes; but I am very fond of work, and it does not really matter if one is tired: one can go on all the same.’

‘I should think it would be better to stop.’

‘Oh no, not for me. It is different for Dolly, because she is not well; but it would be silly if I was always stopping. Things would never get on that way.’

‘And why should they? It is not your business to clothe that miserable parish.’

‘It’s not a miserable parish,’ answered Dolly, firing up for once in her life at the implied reproach. ‘Of course, it’s all rather sad now, because so many people

have been ill, and that *does* make other people anxious and miserable; but generally they are very happy, even if they are poor, and we help mother to take care of them, so that they may not be miserable. I don't think any parish *could* be miserable that had father for its clergyman.'

Grandfather said nothing, and his face was in shadow, so they could not see what he looked like; but Dolly was half afraid she had offended him, and repenting of her heat, she presently said softly:

'Of course, you don't understand, because you don't know father, and all that he does. If you did, you would know what we mean. Oh, I do wish you could see our dear home. You would like it so very much. Nobody could help it.'

'Are you so very anxious to go back?'

'It would be very nice,' said the child wistfully; 'only I know we couldn't, because it would make them anxious, and there is my foot too,' but a sigh ended the sentence, showing how fondly Dolly's thoughts turned homewards.

'Then living in a big house like this, and having plenty of playmates, does not make you discontented with your own quieter home?' said grandfather.

Dolly hardly knew how to answer such a funny question.

'I don't see how it could. I don't think I quite understand. Everybody must like home best.'

'Must they? I fancy that that might be an open question.'

'They must if they had a father and mother like ours,' answered Dolly, with unwonted decision.

‘Well, but, my dear, you might still keep your own father and mother, and yet live very differently from the way you do now. Would you not like it better if you had a big house to live in and plenty of money, and if your parents were great people, instead of being buried alive in a hole in the fens?’

Dolly looked perplexed. It seemed as if grandfather had forgotten that he was talking to such little people.

‘I don’t think any home could be nicer than ours,’ she answered at last. ‘I like it much better than this. Our house is quite big enough for us, and though it might be nice to have more money to help people with, father always says it is much better to work with them and for them than to be always giving them money. He doesn’t give it at all, except when people are ill. If they can work, he always makes them work for it. We give them a job in the garden if there is nothing else to be done. I never heard father say he wanted more money. I think we have as much as we want.’

‘And father is a great man, really,’ Patty could not help adding, as grandfather made no response. ‘If you could hear what they all say of him in the parish, you would understand; and if ever there is danger or hard work, or anything that other people are afraid of, father is always there. You should have seen him at that fire at Farmer Ryecroft’s—do you remember, Dolly?—when he went up the ladder nobody else dared to go near, and got all the people out of the burning house, even the poor dog shut up in the kitchen, and then set the men to work in a line with buckets, and stopped the fire from spreading, though the house could not be saved. Farmer Ryecroft had been one of the

most troublesome men in the parish before, keeping his men from church, and doing all he could to annoy father, because he had spoken to him about getting drunk and beating his poor wife; and now, ever since that, he has been quite different, and he is as kind and nice as he used to be disagreeable. And it is all because father was so brave and splendid that night. He would have lost everything but for him. Nobody knew what to do till he came.'

'Oh, yes!' cried Dolly, kindling with the subject—that subject so dear to the hearts of the home-loving children—'and when the dyke burst at Hounsel Level—oh, Patty, do you remember that? Do you remember how he rode that great horse of Bulstrode's that was hardly broken, and gave the warning all along the valley where the water was coming, and how half the people who were saved owed him their lives? He might have been killed that night. Everyone always says he went with his life in his hand. Mother can never talk about it without the tears coming into her eyes, though it is quite a long time ago now—I can only just remember the night. Oh, grandfather dear, father is really a very great man, and I do not want him to be the least bit different. I don't see how it could make him any greater if he had all the money in the world.'

And 'once launched on their favourite topic, the children capped one story with another, till they had inflicted a whole volume of anecdotes upon their quiet listener.

'But really,' said Dolly, ending up with a little sigh, 'you could not understand properly without coming to see for yourself. If you saw father in the parish you

would soon understand. Oh, I do wish you would come and see us some day. It would be so nice, and it would make mother so happy.'

Dolly had forgotten for a moment that there was any barrier to such a visit, and perhaps this was a good thing, as she could not otherwise have spoken so simply and naturally.

There was no immediate answer to her appeal, and after a few moments Patty ventured to follow it up by saying:

'Oh, that would be so nice, grandfather. We would all try to make you happy if you would come. It does not seem *quite* fair that you should stay always with Aunt Hilda and never with us. Don't you think it would be nice to come and see our home too?'

'It takes more than one to make a bargain like that,' said grandfather in response to the shyly-eager question. 'What would your parents say to such an infliction, eh?'

'Oh, they would be pleased!' cried both little sisters in a breath, Patty adding alone: 'I know mother would be so happy she would not know what to do. You know her nicest stories are always "grandfather stories," and we always wanted so much for you to come and see us. Do say you will, some day! It would be such fun.'

'And your father?'

'Oh, he would say just the same as mother; he always does. Besides, he tells us "grandfather stories" too, and he is just as fond of you as mother. I think we want you more than Aunt Hilda does, because there aren't nearly so many of us.'

'You might come back with us when we go home,' pursued Dolly, emboldened by his quiet answers and gentleness. He had not spoken in his sharp way once all that time, and she fancied, when the firelight flickered on his face, that it was very much more soft in its expression than usual.

'Yes, how nice that would be! We would keep it as a sort of surprise to cheer mother up after her long time of nursing and trouble. It would be just what would do her more good than anything. Oh, do you think you could, grandfather?'

'We will see, we will see,' answered the old man, rising slowly from his seat. 'We may think of a better plan than that;' and then he went away without any more explanation, leaving the little sisters looking wonderingly at one another.

'Oh, do you think he will? Do you think he really meant it? I don't think he was angry, do you?'

'No, I don't think he was—he didn't speak as though he were. I think he is not as cross really as they all think him. I'm sure we could be fond of him if he would let us. Do you know, I fancy he would be happier in our house than he is here. Nobody cares to sit with him here—Jessie and Hilda say so. He has his own rooms, and nobody ever goes to see him. Mother would, if he would come and see us, and I think he would like it, for he likes us to talk to him, though he doesn't say much, and mother can make anything she says interesting. I do wish he would take us home when we go! Wouldn't mother be surprised to see him get out of the train?'

It was as good as medicine to Dolly to have some

idea like this to turn over in her head ; and though they did not make any very great strides with grandfather, and they did not often manage to summon up courage to talk as intimately as they had done that night, still there was a different feeling towards him growing up, and he often looked in on his way up and down, and brought the best of the flowers and fruit to his little patient upstairs.

And then, in addition to all this, Letty had some very strange and exciting news to impart. The history of their new cousin was in due course detailed to the wondering sisters by the triumphant little maiden, who felt so much personal concern in her hero. It was a satisfaction to the timid Dolly to know that the strange wild sounds she had heard at night were nothing but the strains evoked from Cousin Duke's violin, which he always turned to when he could not sleep. Letty had made him play to her, to see how he did it, and he had been amused to hear of the midnight alarm he had been the means of causing.

It was still more interesting to hear that the young man was going to give up some of his lonely ways, and emerge from the total isolation in which he had lived so long. It surprised these little girls less than his own relatives, who had done so much in past days to induce him to mix once more in the family circle ; but in the visits paid by their seniors to Dolly's room the children heard scraps of conversation which told them how much wonder was being excited by it, and gave them more idea than any words of Letty's had done how great a source of anxiety and trouble this sick and wayward youth had been to his relatives for many long years.

They were very curious to see him, but were not likely to do so till Dolly was released from captivity. By that time all the grown-up visitors would be gone, and then Duke, it was said, would begin to mingle from time to time with the home party. He was too much the invalid to do a great deal; but he could spend a part of each day with them, and there was some talk of having the children more downstairs at such times, as it was whispered that it would probably 'make things easier all round.'

Much of what was said was barely intelligible to the two little girls who heard it, but they did gather this—that it was considered a great triumph to have conquered Duke's obstinate aversion to his own family, and that the credit of the conquest was in the main laid to Letty's account. It made them very proud of their independent little sister, even without exactly understanding what it was that she had done.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GREAT HALL

THE great hall at Tarnside was one of the most remarkable features of the house. Although situated in the modern part of the building, it had been modelled upon the banqueting-hall of the old Manor House, and it was altogether more like some stately room than an ordinary entrance-hall, and was, in fact, screened off from the great door by some antique carving, though visitors arriving at the house had to pass through it before reaching the various rooms. The oak staircase descended somewhere in the middle, and branched off to right and left after the first flight, towards a gallery above, which ran all round the hall. There was such a commodious sheltered recess behind and beneath the wide staircase, that it almost resembled a miniature room in itself, and it was in this private little nook that a couch was put up for Duke, when he had allowed himself to be persuaded that it was doing him harm to seclude himself longer in his old solitude.

It had been a hard struggle, for it involved the sacrifice of some of his most cherished prejudices; and even when he had given his consent, he sometimes felt as if he must retract his word, and let matters go on in

the old way. But the very liberty of action and indulgence always shown him by his father helped to keep him true to his resolve. He knew he had behaved very badly to his father, and had acted in a manner that would have caused many parents to disown him altogether, yet, notwithstanding his genuine regret, too much of the old sore feeling remained for him to have any pleasure in the idea of what he was about to do; and had it not been for Letty's pleasure, and the interest that she and the twins took in the thought of introducing him to his family once again, he might have sunk back into dejection and despondency.

But Letty's pride and pleasure in the whole arrangement, in addition to the hearty enjoyment of Punch and Judy, kept Duke firm to his resolution; he was resolved not to disappoint her, and so one day, almost to his own surprise, he found himself being led along the lower corridor and out into the hall, where his favourite couch had been already transported. All the visitors had left the house, and the three members of the family who were away had not yet returned, though they were expected on the morrow, so that there was only a small party to face to-day, and Letty wondered why Duke looked so white when any sudden noise made itself heard, and why he listened so absently to her eager chatter. He lay still when once he had reached his couch, without seeming to have the least wish to move about or look round at many of the curious things collected in this great place. Letty was much more interested in them herself, for this was her first visit to the unknown regions of the grown-up people, and she felt quite an adult herself as she wandered about on tip-toe, and

admired the carved oak and the armour and trophies on the walls. Punch and Judy, who enjoyed to the full the liberty to come into this part of the house with the new brother, were racing about on the terrace, forgetful of all but the enjoyment of their game; but Letty did not stray far from Duke's side, for she was not quite happy about him. He did not seem as happy as she had hoped he would be, and there was a look in his eyes that troubled her, she hardly knew why.

Presently there was the rustle of a dress, and Aunt Hilda came out of one of the rooms, and advanced slowly, looking just a little agitated herself, though her manner was quite calm and composed. Letty would never have guessed that she was in the least excited if she had not seen that her hand trembled as she held it out to her.

'Is Duke here?' she asked, and then the child realized for the first time that this was their first meeting since the day that Duke had run away in anger years ago, because he so hated his step-mother.

Silently placing her hand in her aunt's, she led the way to Duke's couch, and he suddenly pulled himself to his feet, looking as white as a ghost and trembling in every limb. Letty was half frightened, and she drew a little on one side, watching breathlessly what should happen.

Aunt Hilda held out her hand, and her lips trembled. Though she was not at all like mother in her ways generally, Letty saw for the first time a look of mother in her face then.

'My poor boy,' she said very gently, 'I am grieved to see you so changed. Lie down again. You are not fit to stand.'

But he did not lie down, though he grew whiter every moment.

‘I—I want to tell you that I am sorry,’ he said, speaking like one who forces out every word by a painful effort. ‘I behaved very ill. I owe you an apology. I will not trouble you more than I can help. I would not have inflicted myself upon you, but that my father said you wished it.’

His lips were dry. His eyes were growing dim. He held to the mantelshelf behind him as though he would have fallen but for that grip. No wonder, Letty thought, that Aunt Hilda looked frightened. She had never seen anyone look so ghastly before.

‘Duke, my dear boy, I cannot have you agitate yourself so. You are not fit for it. Lie down. There, you are better so.’

She smiled nervously, and sat down beside him. It was difficult to know how to talk to this long-lost son, but she was woman of the world enough to keep her outward composure, and she drew Letty towards her, and seated her upon her knee. There was something in the close proximity of the child that made the situation easier for both. ‘They said you were better,’ said the lady gently; ‘but this does not look much like it.’

‘I am better than I deserve to be, I believe,’ answered Duke, in the tone of repression that showed him still labouring under the strain of the situation. ‘I never expected to see this place again’—looking round at the great hall. ‘I was very fond of it once, but everything looks different now.’

‘I do not think anything has been changed; I do not know of any alterations.’

‘No, I think that is just it—all is the same, and the change is in me. That is what makes the strangeness of it. It feels as if one had come back to a world one had left in another state of being. When I was here last—well, my life lay before instead of behind me—I suppose that is all.’

The lady toyed nervously with Letty’s short curls.

‘I wish you would not talk so, my dear boy; it may not be true.’

‘I will not, if you do not like it—but it is true enough. If it were not I should not be here now.’

She was not sure that she understood, but she heard the ring of the old unquenchable bitterness, which if kept under was not yet killed, and she was pained, though she hardly thought he had meant to be unkind.

But reply was rendered needless by the arrival on the scene of the twins; and then the father was summoned, and grandfather came out from his room, and the servants brought in the tea-tray, and the children were accorded the unwonted indulgence of tea in the hall in kettle-drum fashion, which was at once a delight and a novelty to them.

And so after all Duke’s first appearance in the family passed off as well as could have been expected. Letty was just a little disappointed that there was not more ease and warmth, and that Duke did not look happier; but at least he had done what everyone wished, and she thought he must feel really glad that he had made the effort.

She coaxed him out on to the terrace for a little while by-and-by, and she sat beside him in the sunshine,

whilst he told her tales of the things he had done there when he was a little boy, and then he was more like his better self; but directly anybody else came near the spell seemed broken: the dark or the constrained look would come into his face, and the sunshine fade quite away. It was but a poor fitful gleam at the best of times, and even that was seldom seen unless Letty managed to conjure it up.

Uncle Marmaduke came out presently and sat down beside his son and entered into conversation with him; whilst Letty played quietly by herself a little way off. She asked Aunt Hilda's leave, and then picked a pretty nosegay to put in her cousin's room when he went back; and when he was left alone again she stole up to him and placed her hand within his as if in token of sympathy.

For Duke's face was very sad indeed, as he sat on the terrace looking out over the sunny landscape. It went to her tender little heart to see it, and pressing up to his side she whispered: .

'Please don't be so unhappy. I want to make you happier.'

He was resting his head on his hand and gazing straight out before him; now he just placed his disengaged arm round Letty's shoulders and drew her towards him.

'You must not bother your kind little head about me. I am not repenting of what I have done—so do not trouble yourself over that; but I don't think the experiment is going to be remarkably successful. I think you will soon heartily wish me back again in seclusion.'

‘I shall not,’ answered Letty stoutly.

‘Possibly not—you are not one of them.’

‘And I do not believe any of them will; but if they did it would not matter. You did what was right—for I am sure it was right—and nobody can do more than that.’

‘Ah, but people have an unfortunate trick of fancying, as I was foolish enough to do myself, that when they have made a great effort and done something excessively disagreeable for the sake of duty, it will be followed by some compensating satisfaction—that, in fact, there will be some reward for a virtuous act; and experience unfortunately teaches just the reverse, and robs us of our pleasant little delusions; and then we begin to wonder what is the good of anything.’

She was perplexed, as she often was by Duke’s dark sayings, but his look gave her courage.

‘Will you come and see Dolly and Patty, if it will not hurt you to go upstairs?’

The interruption was welcome, for the strain had been severe and had told heavily upon him. Even sitting here and looking about him over the familiar garden brought with it sorrowful thoughts of his wilfully wasted life; he felt that he had reached the limit of endurance for that day, and was glad to have a way of retreat opened to him.

He knew all about the little sisters upstairs, Dolly’s accident, and her busy captivity, and several messages had already passed between the two semi-invalids. Now that it had been suggested for him to visit her, he assented readily enough.

‘I have to get up the stairs somehow to reach

my own quarters. I can manage it well enough if I take my time. Come along, Letty, and show me the way. I have almost forgotten the house by this time, I have been so long shut up in my own corner.'

Letty's face was all sunshine in a moment. She fetched him his stick, and explained to the others where he was going, and then she returned and took his hand, dancing along beside him, and curbing her impatience as she saw how difficult and painful was the ascent of even that easy staircase.

'I don't think you ought to go up and down stairs,' she said with a motherly air of concern. 'It can't be good for you, when it hurts you so much.'

'Nothing matters really, one way or the other, now, and I can't give up getting out into the air. Some of these days Chi shall make me a hoist, since he is such a mechanical genius.'

'Or you might have a bedroom downstairs.'

'Yes, I've thought of that too, only I like my own quarters, and I can't make up my mind to move yet, though I may come to it in time. Is this the way? How exactly everything is as it was! It was here my mother had her morning-room. I used to come here every morning for my lessons, when I was very small: but all her things were moved away long ago. I have them in my rooms. I suppose this is a bed-room now?'

Letty opened the door with a smiling face, and ushered in the guest very proudly.

'Here is Cousin Duke come to pay you a visit, Dolly, and you must make him comfortable, because he has not been at all well, and he is dreadfully tired too, poor boy.'

Dolly flushed scarlet with surprise and pleasure, for Letty's stories about Duke had raised him to the place of a hero in her imagination, and both she and Patty had been very curious to see him. So Patty went forward and welcomed him warmly, and Letty fussed over him, and pushed up the arm-chair and shook up a cushion, and made him comfortable beside Dolly's sofa, with the air of the most experienced nurse in the world, whilst Duke submitted with languid amusement, watching the quaint ways of the old-fashioned little maidens, and listening to their talk with a sense of restful pleasure that was something new and sweet.

He did not talk much himself, but that was not expected of him. It was condescension enough on his part to come and be with them and let himself be entertained. He looked so exhausted, too, that Patty's womanly instincts were aroused, and she went quietly away, returning speedily with a basin of excellent soup, such as Dolly used to like when she was ill, and this she insisted on Duke's swallowing, which he did to please her, and found himself decidedly better for it.

So he sat with half closed eyes in the comfortable chair, listening to the quiet talk of the little sisters, which was addressed partly to him, and partly to one another; and he found it all so soothing that presently he dropped asleep as he sat, and when he awoke it was almost dark, and Letty greeted his first conscious movement with a little burst of laughter.

'Oh, you have had such a nice sleep! We are so glad, for you did look so *dreadfully* tired. Now you must stay and have supper with us, for it's long past

your own dinner-time. Your old nurse has been in a great state of mind to know what has become of you : but we wouldn't have you woke up for anything. I was sure you had had a bad night, your eyes were so black all round.'

Duke looked round him smiling. It was such a strange awaking to find himself in the midst of faces, even the faces of children, but what was almost more surprising still was that he did not mind it, but found it, on the contrary, wonderfully pleasant.

The evenings had a way of turning chilly, even when the days had been hot, and a little fire now sparkled and glowed upon the hearth. A shaded lamp gave a softened light, and Letty and Patty were bringing out the folding-table upon which the supper was to be spread.

The room was a large one, so there was plenty of space to move about ; and the half of the apartment which included both the window and the fireplace was more like a sitting-room than a bed-chamber. When Duke had last known the place it had been the special sanctum of his mother, and, as he lay back in his chair watching the little, busy, fleeting figures at their tasks, a dreamy sense of unreality stole over him, and he found himself living, as it were, in the happy past.

There came over him the sense of what might have been had he but acted reasonably, and conquered the hostility which he had called loyalty to his mother's memory. Had he but acted as others did under similar circumstances, what a different position his might have been now ! Instead of a broken-down invalid, he might have been leading a life of activity and usefulness, honoured and respected by all, winning fame, perhaps,

by his talents and scholarship, or finding interest and happiness in a home of his own.

It was a pitiful, yet possibly a salutary picture, and just now he contemplated it without bitterness. A very faint perception was growing up within him that possibly good was going to be brought out of evil even for him. He hardly knew how it was that such a thought had come, but it had stolen on him unawares, and was perhaps the cause why he pondered upon the past and the future with so little of the heart-burning that had once made reflection unspeakably bitter.

Could it be that there was consolation even for him? Might it be that he should find some clue to the dark tangle of his wasted life which should lead him at last to a surer peace and happiness than any mere worldly prosperity could have brought? Why did some long unheeded words about losing the whole world and saving the soul find their way into his head that night? He was too tired and dreamy to remember what they were, or even to be certain that he had got the quotation right; but a new feeling was in his heart, and he felt he would like to stay in that quiet place for ever. It seemed so far removed from the tumult of the life of evil passions and desires that he had lived so long.

He was waited on with sedulous care by his little cousins, and found their ministrations very soothing. Presently he bid Letty fetch his violin, and, to the great delight of the trio, he played to them some of the wild wailing airs, the sounds of which had reached them sometimes through the closed doors. All his tunes, as Letty remarked, seemed very sad and very full of moaning and sobbing; but there was a charm about

them and also about the musician that fascinated all the children completely; and when at length he took his departure, he was warmly pressed to come again soon, and readily promised to do so.

And thus ended the day of the long-talked-of experiment.

CHAPTER XVII

HECTOR

WAS it going to turn out well or not ?

That was a question frequently in the minds and on the lips of Sir Marmaduke Tremain and his wife for many days after the plunge had been made, and Duke introduced to the family circle once more.

Hector, Hilda, and Chi had been all decidedly pleased to hear on their return from their visit that Duke had consented to come downstairs and show himself once again. They had all felt that it was very uncomfortable to have him shut up in the lonely wing, which was commonly reported to be haunted. They did not like mysteries ; and as long as the children had not even known of his existence, there was no chance of getting rid of the feeling of uncomfortable secrecy. The whole thing had been felt by the growing sons and daughters to be exceedingly difficult and unnatural, and they were glad that it should come to an end. Yet it was impossible for them not to feel also that Duke had behaved very strangely and very badly towards their mother ; and though they were not conscious of cherishing any resentment, there was a latent antagonism in some hearts at least, and these boys and girls had never

been taught to subdue their angry feelings and try to conquer them in a power stronger than their own. If they were angry, they showed it freely ; and it was their creed that this was the most sensible thing to do. ' Have it out and then make it up ' was a favourite maxim of theirs ; and none of them had learnt to realize that words spoken in anger often leave behind a sting that no subsequent making up can remove, just as a rash act may entail consequences never dreamed of at the moment it is committed.

Not that this danger was apparent from the first. On the contrary, Duke's presence seemed to be warmly welcomed by his half-brothers and sisters, who dearly loved a little novelty. Moreover, as it was the means of getting them greater freedom of action in the house, he was regarded for some time with no small favour.

The order of the day generally was that Duke came down to the hall about three o'clock, and that from then till five the whole household assembled more or less in that place ; and though, as a matter of fact, the elders of the party often kept away, thinking things went more easily without them, there was full liberty to all to come or go at will, and the young people liked the big place very much, and resorted there more and more frequently as the days grew shorter and more uncertain. Occasionally Duke would go into the dining-room to dinner, or dine in the hall and spend an hour in the drawing-room afterwards ; but this was just as he pleased at the time, and was always attended with considerable effort.

Indeed, the whole thing was a greater strain upon him than anyone suspected. After more than three

years of complete seclusion, and with steadily declining bodily health, and almost constant and wearing pain to bear, he was hardly fit to make so great an effort as the one he had resolved upon. He hardly knew why he had made up his mind in the end, and often he was disposed to wish he had let things remain as they were. Yet there was something sweet at rare moments in the sense of belonging once again to a family party, and these moments strengthened his resolve, as did also that increasing yearning for love and sympathy that was undoubtedly growing upon him as he felt his time on earth growing shorter.

And yet, so strong is the force of habit that, despite his real longing for love—his real wish to show that the old rancour was a thing of the past—he was constantly finding himself overcome by a feeling of intense irritation, and could by no means always restrain the bitter words which at such moments would come crowding to his lips, and were uttered before he was well aware of it.

No doubt his physical condition had much to do with his intense irritability at such times. Worn and weak as he was, with a heavy strain always upon him, small wonder if he did feel unable to control the angry retort which some provoking word or slight would occasion. But his half-brothers and sisters were too young to understand or make allowance. He had the Spartan temperament that scorns to complain, and after the first few days they grew used to his wan looks, and no longer regarded him as an invalid to be humoured and amused.

Things generally went well during the early hours of



THE STAIRCASE IN THE HALL.



the afternoon; Dolly was downstairs again, and the influence of the three little cousins was always directed towards the keeping of the peace. Then Punch and Judy were great at devising romps, and there was generally plenty of laughing and fun till the five o'clock bell summoned the younger children to tea.

Chi nearly always went with them, as he despised the meagre fare provided for the elders, but Hilda had now leave to remain, and generally availed herself of it, whilst Hector and Jessie, who considered that they now belonged to the dining-room contingent, stayed on as a matter of course.

It was at such times as these that there were not unfrequently scenes of a stormy character, not the less stormy because there was an appearance of coolness on both sides. Hector did not mean to be offensive or aggressive, but he had been brought up to the idea of his own importance (just as Duke himself had been), and he assumed almost unconsciously the airs of an eldest son.

And so it came about—how, no one could exactly say—that there were haughty and bitter words exchanged almost daily between the brothers. Jessie made faint attempts to keep the peace, but her sympathies were always on the side of her own brother, whilst hot-tempered Hilda made open and common cause with him, and some of the sharpest words came from her tongue. Duke, on his side, had the power of saying the most cutting things in the coolest and most irritating way, and his age gave him an immense advantage whenever there was an argument of any kind. He would make mincemeat of Hector's most cherished theories,

and hold up to ridicule his high-flown sentences in a fashion that was truly exasperating. It was no wonder that the old sense of hostility awoke into new and more active life, or that Duke felt he had made a great mistake in ever recognising the family whom he had been taught to regard as his supplanters.

Poor Duke! no doubt it was a hard position to be placed in. Hector was approaching the age at which *he* had cut adrift from his home and had wrecked his life, as has been related. The force of contrast could not but strike him, and he had so little to help him in the struggle with self. Day by day he might resolve not to be tempted into a dispute, but the occasion would arise—arise generally when he was weary, and his nerves were on edge with the jarring feeling which generally succeeded the noise of the earlier part of the afternoon. And the whole thing would be enacted over again, each time with an increase of the old bitterness.

Had the seniors of the house known it, something might have been done to check this; but all were ashamed to make any complaint, or to say a word that should reveal the true state of the case. Duke did not admit even to himself that he cared for the silly taunts of a mere boy, and Hector was rather ashamed of the quarrels he could not help provoking, though he did not mean to be offensive. The children upstairs wondered why Hilda spoke scornfully of Duke, but her reply always was that he behaved abominably to mamma, and as she seemed to know, her words carried weight, though to the three little sisters it all seemed very strange, as Duke was so nice whenever

they had him to themselves, and they could not understand what made him different with the others.

Chi always got on with him—indeed, he and Chi were great friends. The lad manufactured a number of contrivances for his greater comfort, and made a point of being on the spot to see him safely up or down the stairs. He often rated Hector roundly for being such a ‘brute’ as to badger a fellow as ill as Duke. But then Hector had not Chi’s quick observation or placable temperament, and he thought he had a right to say what he pleased. Besides, there was no denying the fact that Duke did *not* behave well to his step-mother. He had a way of ignoring her, feigning not to hear her questions, and pointedly withdrawing from a conversation if she chanced to join in it, which was the reverse of courteous, and which gave her visible pain. And as the habit grew with indulgence, it soon became painfully marked, and Sir Marmaduke began seriously to debate within himself whether he could permit such discourtesy to go on unchecked; yet to say a word would inevitably have brought back the old uncomfortable state of things, and widened the breach. Though as things now were, no one could call them comfortable.

But Lady Tremain begged her husband to be patient.

‘I think it will come right presently—I do indeed. I know there is some want in myself—I feel it every day. If my sister Dorothy were in my place she would win his heart directly, as these sweet little lasses from the fens have done. See how different he is with them. They go and sit in his room by the hour together, and do what they like with him. It would be just the same

with Dorothy—I know it would. She had the gift of winning hearts, and I have not. It is not all his fault, and you must be patient—you must indeed.'

So Sir Marmaduke listened to his wife, and watched with curiosity the children, who seemed to accomplish without an effort of any kind what he had been unsuccessfully striving after for many long years. But they did not know the simple secret these quaint little old-fashioned children possessed for opening hearts, and whilst they looked on, trying to learn it, the crisis came that wrought such changes amongst them all.

It came about in this wise.

For some days previously Duke had been unusually irritable. He would fly out at a word; nothing seemed to please him. He sneered at everything and everybody, and even the three little sisters had not dared to visit him in his room, though he had never actually spoken harshly to them.

Chi declared boldly that he was ill. He found out that Duke was much more helpless than before in getting about, and that every movement was attended by a great increase of pain. He stoutly urged him to stay up quietly in his own quarters and see a doctor; but this suggestion was so ill received that it had not been repeated.

Indeed, the only effect it had was that Duke, instead of waiting for Chi as usual the next afternoon, made the transit to the hall by himself, and consequently arrived there in a very exhausted state, with every nerve in his body vibrating from the strain. Outside a furious gale was raging—at least, the gale had raged all night, and now it was dropping, to be followed

by torrents of rain. There had been thunder-storms about for a good many days, and the electric state of the air seemed to affect the whole household to a greater or less extent.

Jessie and Dolly were languid, the twins were thoroughly tiresome and mischievous. Hector and Hilda showed a disposition to find fault with everything, and only Chi and the other two little cousins appeared to retain their usual spirits and equanimity.

Chi was a good deal disturbed about Duke just now. There had been something very like an open breach between him and his father the previous evening in the drawing-room, all on account of his insolence to his step-mother. Now, insolence in its direct form was something new in Duke, who had never advanced before beyond the rudeness of silence. Hector had come up in considerable excitement, roundly declaring that he would like to kick the fellow out of the house, and at breakfast-time the girls had been just as angry, and it seemed as if a fracas had become inevitable.

Chi's great hope was that Duke would remain upstairs in his own quarters that day. He was certain that he was ill and unfit to move, and that illness was the reason of his strange behaviour. Indeed, so certain was he that there was some mischief at work which no one suspected because of the patient's stoicism and reserve, that he had resolved to go off himself that very morning, and fetch the doctor who attended him, though his visits were but few and far between. But the storm had quite prevented this expedition. There were only two horses at Tarnside, and neither was fit

to go a ten miles' ride in such weather. The young mare was terrified of the thunder, which was still rumbling round and round the hills, and would not leave her stable for any amount of persuasion, and the steady old horse was lame from a strained shoulder, and had to be laid up with a blister.

So Chi was forced to abandon his wish, but he decided, if there was no change for the better during the day, he would communicate his uneasiness to his father, and try and get him to insist on Duke's seeing his doctor—a thing to which he appeared to have a great aversion.

But he hoped Duke would take his advice, and remain the next few days at least in his own room. He felt sure he had had enough of society to last some considerable time, and he was therefore not a little surprised to find quite a party assembled in the hall when he went down to see what was going on, and it was plain, too, that some angry words had passed already, for Hector's face was flushed, and Hilda wore her most combative air, whilst Duke's white face looked as if carved in flint, and the little cousins were gazing from one to another as if not a little frightened.

'Don't be an ass, Hector,' said Chi in a low tone to his brother. 'Can't you see that the fellow is not fit to be badgered? I'm sure you had enough of it last night, by all accounts. Can't you have the sense to hold your tongue and let well alone?'

But Hector did not care to be taken to task by his younger brother. His only reply was an angry frown, and the next moment he took up, as it appeared, the

thread of his former discourse, and addressed himself haughtily to his half-brother.

‘So I hope you understand that I will have no more of it. It is perfectly intolerable. And if you cannot speak civilly to my mother, I tell you plainly that you will not be allowed to enter her drawing-room—I will take care that you are forbidden the place.’

Duke did not take the trouble to open his eyes; but there was an ugly sneer upon his face, and his voice was pitched in a key that always exasperated Hector by its cool superciliousness.

‘And by whose authority will these laws be laid down? That of the son-and-heir, or of the mother who instructs him?’

Hilda caught the taunt more quickly than Hector. Her face flamed, and she burst out vehemently:

‘How dare you say such things, you wicked, hateful creature, who have never done anything but try to make people miserable all the time you ever were at home, and behaved so disgracefully always! Whose doing is it that Hector has been brought up as son-and-heir? And, for the matter of that, do you think we shall any of us stand having our mother insulted as you insult her every day of your life?—treating her as if she were dust beneath your feet—when, if she treated you as you deserve, she would turn you out of the house.’

‘What, again?’

Hilda’s face was more furious than ever.

‘How dare you say that, when you know it was all your wicked temper and jealousy that drove you away! How dare you try to fasten the blame upon our mother,

who was always far kinder to you than you deserved ! Do you think we can none of us remember how you went on, and how we all hated the very sight of you, because there was nothing but wretchedness and ill-temper all the time you were in the house ? If you chose to run away, it was no doing of anyone's but your own. The only pity is that you ever came back, if you are going on in the same way now.'

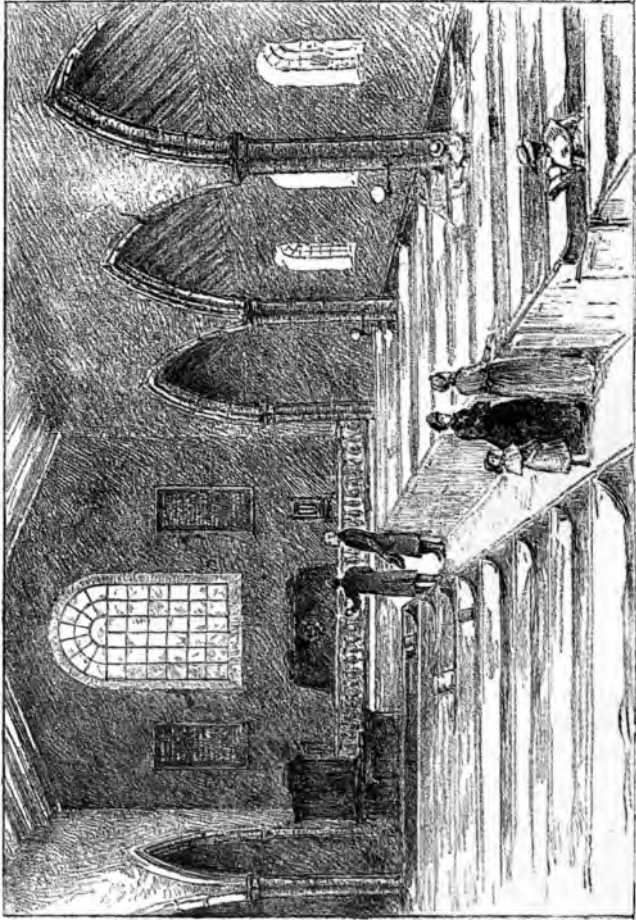
'Hilda, be quiet—for shame of yourself,' interposed Chi hastily. 'How can you be so stupid and unkind ?'

'Oh, pray, do not interrupt her—let her have her say—it is all very instructive,' sneered Duke in his negligent way ; 'no doubt she has got her orders from head-quarters.'

Chi shrugged his shoulders in a sort of mute protest against the unreasonable folly of the world at large, and uttered an impatient exclamation on the subject of Kilkenny cats : but Hector and Hilda were furious. It did not take much to make their hot blood boil in their veins, and Duke did his utmost to exasperate them, as if he really took pleasure in rousing their passions to the highest pitch.

It was two against one, but in the wordy warfare Duke was more than a match for his two antagonists, and if his cause were the weaker, at least he handled his weapons so much more skilfully that he appeared to gain the advantage at every turn, and Hector grew beside himself with passion.

Things were getting to a pass that warranted interference from the higher powers, and Chi, though anything but a tale-bearer in general, had slipped away quietly to summon his father to put an end to a scene



ST. LAWRENCE'S CHURCH.



at must certainly be very bad for Duke, when the imax came in a way he little anticipated.

Hector was looking over some fossils that he had collected at different times during his rambles about the hills ; he had been sorting them before the quarrel arose, and he held a heavy stone in his hand during the discussion.

Now Hector had been known before to hurl missiles of some kind or another at his antagonist in a quarrel, and Chi still bore the scar of a cut inflicted in this way by his brother. But the discipline of school had given the boy greater self-control, and he had not broken out in any very violent fashion for some considerable time now, though the fierce, untamed spirit was still there, in all its old force. There had been no attempt made by parents or instructors to strike at the root of the evil, and so, when provocation once arose, the evil spirit arose with it, and that feeling of deadly hatred which we have been taught is the spirit of the murderer.

At some peculiarly stinging retort on the part of Duke, Hector's self-control entirely left him. He lifted his arm, in a blind access of fury which robbed him for the moment of all reason or power of thought, and hurled the heavy stone straight at his brother's head.

Had it fallen where it was aimed it must have killed Duke upon the spot ; but the missile slipped a little as it was being launched, and instead of striking him on the head, it glanced aside and caught him full upon the lame leg, which was, as usual, resting on the couch. A sharp, low cry of intense suffering broke from Duke ;

he started up, and then sank back, gasping, half fainting, a cold sweat breaking out over his face.

In a moment all was terror and confusion. Sir Marmaduke came hurrying in, no one knew how, nor why. Bells were rung, and messages dispatched in many directions, and no one seemed to know exactly what it was that had happened. Jessie and Hilda hurried the younger children off to their own quarters, whither Hector followed them, looking as if he at least had had a sharp lesson. Chi alone remained below, and the others waited breathlessly for the news that his coming would bring.

The children crouched together beside the fire, looking at the pale anxious faces of their seniors with mute appeal. Dolly was so terrified that Patty had much ado to calm her nervous shivering, and Letty sat with wide-open eyes, trying to listen if any sounds from below should penetrate to their retreat.

Hector paced up and down, in all the misery of a warm-hearted lad whose gusts of passion were soon over, and who was now bitterly ashamed of his violence and cowardly blow.

‘To think that I should hit a fellow tied by the leg and as weak as a rat! I can’t think how I could be such a brute! You don’t think he is dead? Jessie—Hilda—do speak to a fellow—do say he isn’t dead.’

‘I don’t suppose he is dead,’ answered Jessie, who was still trembling, and not much inclined to spare Hector, for she felt that there might have been blood on his hands, after that fierce, rash blow. ‘But he is so ill as it is, that a very little may make him worse. I don’t like to think about it.’

Hilda's face was very pale. She felt that even if she had not raised her hand against her brother, she nevertheless was not guiltless in the matter. She had done her utmost to stir up the strife that had ended so seriously; and she was too honest to blind herself to her own share in the blame.

'It was my fault too, Hector,' she said, going up and laying her hand upon his arm; 'and if Duke dies, and if you get into trouble, I will bear my share of it. If they put you in prison, they shall put me there, too.'

None of the boys and girls felt any security as to the future and their brother's fate. For all they knew, Hector might be put in prison, and a sense of terror fell upon them all; but in justice to them it may be said that their thoughts were less with themselves and their possible danger and disgrace than with him whom they had allowed themselves to hate, and who might now be dying, for all they knew. Never before had the possible result of a passionate act been brought home to them in such a terrible fashion. It had been a favourite maxim with them that hard words break no bones, and that it was much better to be passionate than sullen or deceitful. Some amongst them had even been a little proud of the high spirit of the family, and had thought it rather a fine thing to speak out exactly what they thought, regardless of consequences. *Now*, Hilda would have given all she possessed to be able to recall her words of a short time back, for she felt certain that if she had not fomented the strife they might have been saved this tragic ending to the scene.

'That hateful stone!' cried Hector, still pacing up



and down; 'I declare I will never touch a fossil again!'

'I don't see that it was the fossil's fault,' said Letty, who was listening to every word with the utmost attention. She had crossed the room, and was standing now beside Hilda, and Hector paused when he reached them, staring out of the window in an abstracted way. His face was very troubled; he looked a very different boy from his usual bold, merry, overbearing self. 'I think it would be a pity to throw them all away.'

'I shall never care to look at them again.'

'Oh! but——'

'I will pitch the whole lot into the lake, and the cabinet after them—I never want to see them again!'

'Well, *I* think that would be silly,' said Letty with great decision. 'I don't think it can ever be nice to be wasteful or destructive; if you weren't so rich you would understand better about that. And besides, you'd better keep them to help you to remember—as mother made me keep my doll.'

'Your doll?' repeated Hector absently, only half hearing what the child said—'what doll?'

'The doll I broke in a passion once,' answered Letty, hanging her head. 'I was only a very little girl when it happened, but I have never forgotten. I thought she was tiresome and naughty about being dressed one day, and at last I got so angry I beat her head against the floor till I broke her all to bits; but I wasn't a bit sorry till mother came in and saw her lying in the corner, and then I was ashamed of myself.'

'Did she scold you?' asked Hilda, glad to be diverted for a moment from her own thoughts.

Letty shook her head with decision.

‘Mother never scolds—she only just looks—it’s quite enough; but she talked to me about getting angry, and how sad it was to let ourselves get into passions, so that we do and say things that we do not really mean. And she told me to keep the doll to remind me about it; and she gave me——’ Letty suddenly stopped short, and looked out of the window, instead of finishing her sentence.

‘What did she give you?’ asked Hilda with sudden curiosity. ‘Was it a whipping?’

‘She gave me a little fresh bit to say in my prayers,’ answered the child steadily, still looking away over the rain-blurred hills—‘a little bit about keeping away angry thoughts, and helping us to conquer them. I say it every day: but I don’t think you would understand. You don’t care about prayers. You only care for laughing and playing and amusing yourselves, and you like quarrelling and getting angry. You do it every day.’

Letty spoke in the most simple good faith—not critically, but as though remarking on an indisputable fact. Hilda was quite silent for a few moments, and then she bent down and whispered in the child’s ear:

‘Letty, will you come to my room to-night, and teach me your prayer? I should like to learn it too.’

And before the surprised child had time to make any rejoinder, Hilda had slipped from the room like a shadow.

CHAPTER XVIII

A CANOE VOYAGE

HILDA felt that at all costs she must obtain some information as to what was going on downstairs. She slipped like a ghost along the corridor, and just as she reached the door of Chi's room, she met him coming out. His face was very pale and set. He hardly seemed to see her at first; he was, to her great surprise, clad in his waterproof yachting suit, as though bound on some adventure that involved a wetting.

'Chi,' she cried in astonishment, 'what is it? Where are you going?'

'To Waterside,' he said shortly. 'Don't stop me. Every moment is of importance.'

'But, Chi, how can you? It is ten miles, if it is a step, and there is not a horse that can go out—I know that by what they said at lunch. Besides, the waters are out—you cannot cross the ford. Do tell me what it all is?'

'It's just this,' he answered, stopping short, and speaking clearly and rapidly, 'that Duke will actually die if something cannot be done for his relief. They have sent a man off on the mare, at all risks, to see if he can hire another horse by the way, and get into

Waterside ; but I don't believe in the least that he can. And, any way, it will be hours before he can get back. So I am just going myself in the canoe—I have got a duplicate order for the chemist, though nobody knows what I am up to, they are all in such confusion. It's not a third of the way by water, and I'm almost certain the lake is quiet enough to do it. Anyway, I am going to try. If I don't come back, you will know what has happened.'

Hilda listened to him with parted lips, and eyes that glowed strangely beneath their straight black brows. Without another word she darted into her own room, which was close at hand, and came out next moment wrapping herself in a long hooded mackintosh that covered her from head to foot.

'I shall go with you, Chi,' she said.

'You may come and help me to launch it,' he answered. 'Every moment saved is something;' and away hurried brother and sister, down the staircase and out through the door into the driving rain, none hindering them, for all were engrossed elsewhere, and none suspected the errand on which they were bent.

'Hurrah!' suddenly cried Chi, as they dashed up the pathway that led to the little boat-house he had mended up for his treasured craft, 'the wind has shifted, and is not half as strong. It will help and not hinder me now. I shall do it without a doubt, I believe. See, there is hardly any foam on the lake, and with the wind behind the waves will be nothing. Who cares for the rain? It will be rather refreshing than otherwise, and if no squall comes up in the next hour, I shall be as right as a trivet.'

'The rapids?' asked Hilda.

'Will be nothing after this rain. You know when the stream is in flood, rapids are nothing—any fool could shoot them then—the rocks are all well covered. It will be all right, you will see, and I shall be at Waterside long before dusk—back home before dark, I hope.'

'You will have the wind against you then.'

'I shan't come back in the canoe at all, but get a boat and several strong fellows to row it, and bring the doctor with me if I can, as well as what is wanted. There will be no trouble about a boat at Waterside, if one only pays them well for coming out such dirty weather, and the governor would give them anything they liked to ask for bringing help to-night.'

Hilda asked no more questions then. They had reached the boat-house and were engrossed in launching the canoe. But when it was once afloat, instead of holding it for Chi, she stepped in herself, and quietly took up one of the paddles.

'Hilda, don't waste time.'

'I'm not; I am going with you. We shall go much faster if there are two of us, and I can navigate almost as well as you. I know I shall help, and not hinder. Please, Chi, don't object; you know there is hardly any danger. And it is the only thing I can do to atone—and it was as much my doing as Hector's, really.'

He hesitated a moment, glanced at her, and then quietly took his place.

'Well, I don't know if I ought. I couldn't if I really thought there would be danger, but I don't. I believe

we shall do it all right. I know what you are when you're bent on a thing—so off we go; but if it looks nasty when we reach the lake, I shall put you ashore, and you must not be contumacious.'

There could be no more conversation whilst they were shooting down the narrow stream which led out upon the lake, for they wanted all their wits about them to keep the canoe's head steady, and steer a good course. But what they had accomplished many times out of a love of adventure was no difficulty now that there was real necessity, and before long the little craft glided out like a bird upon the open waters of the Tarn, which communicated in due course with a larger lake beyond, on the far bank of which stood the little town of Waterside.

Chi looked quickly round him, when they reached the open water, and then said briefly:

'All right, you may come.'

Hilda's heart bounded as she heard these words, and she plied her paddle with right good will. The wind was not boisterous, and was now behind them, and the canoe flew over the water like a sea-bird.

'Oh, Chi, if it had not been for your canoe!' she said at length, after the first strain had subsided, and they had settled quietly to their work.

'Yes, I always did think it was silly not to have a regular boat belonging to the house, seeing that the roads are so soon impassable after a heavy storm. I suppose it is because we are so little here; but it doesn't seem safe, really, to let ourselves be so easily cut off from everything.'

'Chi,' began Hilda again, speaking low and timidly, 'is Duke badly hurt, do you think?'

'I'm afraid he is; but nobody could touch him. It was such dreadful pain.'

'Oh, Chi! But you don't think he will—die?'

'I can't tell anything about it. I never saw anybody look as he did. Grandfather could do nothing for him, and said they must have anæsthetics and opiates if his life was to be saved, and that his own doctor must see him at once. It was then they sent off to the stables to say that a messenger must go at all risks; but I felt certain he would take ages, if he ever got there at all, and then I thought of the canoe: but I wouldn't say a word, lest mamma should be frightened. And that is all I know. If he dies it will be from exhaustion. But if we can bring things to deaden the pain he may be all right again—as much as he ever was, at least. But he is much weaker than anybody seems to know. I believe he has been getting worse for some time, only he wouldn't say a word about it.'

Hilda drew a long breath.

'Oh, if only I had known!'

Chi did not reproach her; it was not his way.

'One can never tell beforehand just how things will turn out, and I don't see that it was worse to badger the poor fellow to-day than it has been before. The pity is that you ever began that kind of thing—once begun, one never can stop, somehow. Of course, he has a temper, and a rough side to his tongue—we all know that, and all have a touch of the complaint ourselves; but when one thinks what a miserable life he has had, and how he is so ill, and so lonely, with

nothing to look forward to or brighten his life, it does seem as if one might have a little patience. I wonder how we should feel, laid on our backs like that, always tired, and ill, and in pain. I don't suppose we should be very sweet-tempered.'

'Oh, Chi! I wish I had thought more of that before. But it is so hard always to remember.'

'Yes, that's just the worst of it. We all of us speak before we think, and then this kind of thing happens.'

'You don't—not half so much as we do. And then, one doesn't know how to cure one's self. One may make a dozen good resolutions, but the moment one gets angry, away they all go, and it's just the old thing over again.'

'I know,' answered Chi; 'I've felt it myself. Well, one can but do one's best, I suppose; but we can never undo what has been done, unluckily, and if one will not think beforehand one has to do it afterwards.'

After that the brother and sister paddled on in silence, working with a right good will, but talking little. Hilda was pondering deeply on subjects that had seldom troubled her before: the incident of the afternoon had brought home to her in very forcible fashion the lesson we all of us learn sooner or later—that if we do not learn to master our words and actions, they will master us in time and prove terrible tyrants, inflicting very great pain and misery upon us. Life looked altogether a more serious thing than it had ever done before, and for the first time the girl realized that the strength of will and character of which she had been somewhat proud might in the end prove a source of terrible injury to her and others if she could not

learn in time to control it. She began to feel the need of help—help from a deeper source than any she had craved before; and she thought of Letty's words, and the look on the child's face as she had told about the little prayer her mother had taught her to use. Hilda had been properly brought up in the ordinary acceptance of the term: she said prayers pretty regularly, read the Bible sometimes, and went to church as a matter of course. She knew that she was to be confirmed on the next opportunity, and thought that all this was surely enough. Yet, somehow, to-day she began to feel that all these things lay outside her real life, made no lasting impression upon her, and were little more than a form which was right and proper to observe, but meant nothing to her really.

A voice in her heart began to whisper that this ought not to be so, and she knew that if a storm were to arise on the lake which should endanger their safety, she should feel terribly afraid to die. She resolved to talk to her little cousins about it, if she could get over her natural reserve, for she felt certain that they would understand the matter far better than she did—they had plainly been brought up in a very different school.

'I wish we knew Aunt Dorothy and Uncle Rose,' she said suddenly, speaking aloud without knowing that she did so; 'I believe she would tell us.'

'I believe she would,' answered Chi, just as if he had heard all the train of thought that had led up to these words. 'And I believe we *shall* see her one of these days, too. I have heard them talking about it more than once.'

'That would be nice. I'm sure we should like Aunt



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Dorothy, by what those children say, though they are such funny little things. They tell everything to their mother, who seems to understand it all just as if she were one of them.'

'People are different,' was Chi's not very striking remark; but Hilda understood his meaning, and her answer was a little sigh.

The transit of the lake was accomplished in less time than Chi had believed possible. Leaving Hilda to make arrangements with the hotel-keeper, to whom the Tremain family was well-known, about the boat for the return journey, the boy hurried away on his errands, using the best speed in his power, for he knew that much might depend upon his efforts. Luckily he found the doctor in, and a few words explained the urgency of the case, and made him as eager to be off as Chi himself. Although Duke had never liked him, the young doctor took a great interest in his wayward patient, and had done his utmost for him, though he had been unable to check the progress of the disease. Whilst yielding to Duke's intense and morbid shrinking from any kind of society, Mr. Dunstan had believed such absolute seclusion to be a mistake, and possibly it was his very efforts to persuade his patient to view life with other eyes that had roused dislike and suspicion. At any rate, he was very glad to hear that an advance in the right direction had been made, and as he hurried to the chemist's with Chi, he listened to all that the boy could tell him, and appeared greatly interested by what he heard, though a little uneasy when told of the amount of exertion Duke had imposed upon himself of late.

'Give that fellow an inch, and he takes an ell—not but what he would take it, I suppose, if you did not give him anything. But I am sorry there has been injury too. A blow may be attended with very serious results. How did it happen?'

Chi flushed to the roots of his hair.

'It was an accident—at least—yes, I am certain it *really* was an accident. He was hit by a stone—I was not there when it happened.' And the surgeon, seeing that the subject was a painful one, did not pursue it, but hurried down to the boat, as soon as he had got all he needed from his own stores and the chemist's, to find Hilda in readiness for them, with boat and crew all waiting.

'Capital idea to come by water,' said the young man, handing Hilda in. 'You were a bold young lady to come out in such weather. Why did you not send a servant?'

'Nobody can manage the canoe except Chi,' answered Hilda; 'you see, we have no boat at Tarn-side. That was why we came ourselves. It is Chi's canoe—he built it himself, and after him, I can manage it best. So we came together.'

'What, in that cockle-shell—and on such a day? Why, I wonder your parents allowed it.'

'Nobody knew,' answered Hilda; 'but I don't think they would have stopped us if they had. No one can get by road—at least, not for hours, and Duke might have died.'

'Were you not afraid?'

'No; I don't believe Chi would have let me go if he had thought there was real danger. But I should have

hated to have stayed behind. It was the least I could do.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean,' answered Hilda, speaking out boldly, though her face showed that it was by a great effort, 'that it was mostly—or at least partly—my fault that it happened. If he had died before you came, I should never have forgiven myself.'

Mr. Dunstan, though surprised at the assertion, made no comment. He saw that he had plunged into the midst of a piece of family history of a painful kind, and he had no wish to ask inquisitive questions. He admired Hilda for her frankness and high courage, and knew enough of the family to be aware that violent passions were easily aroused amongst its members. The history of his patient, which had been of necessity communicated to him, had told him so much, and he was sure there had been some stormy scene, the details of which he did not seek to learn.

The transit of the two lakes was speedily accomplished, despite the contrary wind. The men knew that haste was needful, and worked at their oars with hearty good-will. The light was only beginning to fade in the western sky as they touched land, and the young doctor was hurried up to the house with breathless speed.

There was still, it seemed, confusion and terror reigning in the house, for the first greeting they received was from Sir Marmaduke himself, who was in the hall, from which place it had been impossible to move Duke. He was pacing restlessly up and down, and the moment he saw who had come, he uttered an

exclamation of profound astonishment, and seized the young surgeon by the hand.

‘Thank God that you have come! We did not believe you could have been here for hours. Here he is, poor fellow, more dead than alive by this time, to judge by his looks. Hilda and Archibald, what are you doing here? This is no place for children. Go up to your own quarters and get off those dripping clothes.’

It was no time for explanations; those could be made later, when there was time to speak and think. Hilda and Chi slipped quietly away without a word, only thankful that they had fulfilled their mission. Hilda was desperately tired, and almost faint with hunger; and in the schoolroom there was quite a commotion to know what had become of the absentees, who could be found nowhere in the house, whilst the drenching rain out-of-doors precluded the supposition of their being outside the walls.

Chi explained in a few words what had happened, and Jessie hurried her sister away to change her dripping garments. The little cousins waited on her and Chi with hot tea, and viands from the tea-table which had been kept for them, and by degrees they grew rested from the strain of fatigue and anxiety, and could sit by the fire and give a detailed account of their exploit. Nobody felt disposed to do anything that evening but sit over the fire, or make little expeditions downstairs in search of news. Hector hardly spoke a word, but sat with his head on his hand, in an attitude of deep dejection. He only spoke once, when Chi was telling of his sudden resolve to try and go to

the town by water, and then he looked up suddenly and said :

‘ You might have let me be the one to go with you.’

But when his brother explained that he had had no intention in the first place of taking anybody, and that he could hardly have trusted his brother’s nerve after what had just occurred, Hector said no more, and hardly seemed to listen to the account of the voyage that had been so unflinchingly taken.

Nothing was heard from below for a very long time. It was rumoured that a room was being prepared on the ground-floor for Duke, and that the doctor was going to stay all night—which, indeed, he must in any case have done on account of the weather ; but nobody seemed to know his verdict about Duke, or even if he were any better.

But presently, long after dark, the door opened softly, and Lady Tremain came in, looking tired and harassed, but dressed, nevertheless, for the evening with her customary elegance, which showed that she had not herself been lately in the sick-room.

‘ How is Duke, mamma ?’ cried Hilda, springing up to meet her.

‘ He is better, I hope—at least, they have got him off into a sort of sleep at last. Mr. Dunstan will stay the night with him. What a mercy it was that you brought him when you did ! What made you think of such a thing ? The groom came back about an hour ago, after having found it quite impossible, even with another horse, to get over the roads.’

‘ Chi thought of it,’ answered Hilda. ‘ It always is Chi who thinks of these things.’

Mamma, I want to tell you it was as much my fault as anybody's that it happened. I set the quarrel going—at least, I helped to make it worse. If anyone is punished, I ought to be.'

'Nobody will be punished,' answered her mother. 'It was an accident, and no one can be seriously blamed. Duke says it was entirely his fault. I do not know myself how it happened. But he said no one was to blame but himself.'

'Did Duke say that?' asked Hilda, with a quiver in her voice. 'I thought he was too ill to speak.'

'That is almost the only thing he has said. But when the doctor began asking questions of us, he roused up to say that it was entirely his own fault, and begged that there might be no more discussion about it. He said something fell upon him, and that is all we know.'

'I flung a stone at him,' said Hector in a muffled voice. 'I believe I meant to kill him when I did it, I was so furious. It was not his fault in the least. How could he guess that I should be such a coward as to strike him! I did it because I was in a passion. It was nobody's fault but mine.'

'Yes, it was mine, too,' cried Hilda; 'for I did all I could to go on making him angry, and getting the quarrel worse. I said most of the things that made him answer back, and made Hector so furious. Oh, mamma, indeed it was all our fault. We do have such dreadful tempers when we are angry—I don't know what will become of us. When something like this happens, one feels as if one might some day do *anything*.'

Hilda looked with troubled gaze into her mother's face, and the three little cousins, sitting close together on the rug, glanced up eagerly too, for they felt hungry for some of that gentle counsel, advice, and comforting reproof which they were used to hearing from their own parents' lips—the tender pointing out of besetting faults, and the way in which they might best be overcome.

But Aunt Hilda's face did not look as mother's would have done under similar circumstances; it wore an expression of nervous distress, and when she spoke her words were hurried and anxious.

'Oh, my dears, I know you did not mean to hurt your brother. It was done unintentionally, and you must be dreadfully grieved about it. But you must not take it to heart and make yourselves miserable—that will do nobody any good. I suppose you have all of you got hot tempers, but you cannot help that. You must try as you grow older to learn self-control. But you have been much better all of you lately—especially Hector. I am quite sure you do not mean to be naughty. And this will be a lesson to you all.'

And then Aunt Hilda got up rather hurriedly, and said she must go back to papa, and she went away, leaving matters very much where they had been before, and the clergyman's little daughters in a state of considerable surprise and bewilderment.

CHAPTER XIX

A VISIT FROM THE BISHOP

‘It’s the Bishop—the Bishop—*our* Bishop!’ cried Letty excitedly, suddenly making a dash towards the door. ‘Oh, how did you come? Oh, it *is* nice to see somebody! We have been so miserable.’

The kind Bishop, smiling at this greeting, suffered himself to be led towards the cheerful log-fire that was burning on the hearth in the children’s play-room. Hilda was there, and the three ‘fen-fairies,’ as he playfully called his little friends; but the boys were elsewhere and the twins playing in another room, whilst Jessie was with her mother. The faces of the children looked sorrowful, and Dolly’s eyes showed traces of recent tears. Hilda’s brow was dark. A heavy cloud rested upon it. She smiled as she greeted the Bishop, but soon her face grew gloomy again, though the darkness was one of sorrow, not of temper.

‘Oh, it is so nice of you to come,’ said Letty, climbing upon the Bishop’s knee, as if by natural right. ‘Why did nobody tell us you were coming? It would have made us so much happier.’

‘My visit is quite unexpected, my little girl. I was in the neighbourhood, and thought I would come and

see you all before I left; and at Wendover I heard there was trouble here, so I came as quickly as I could to see if I could be of any use; but nobody knew I was on my way, so they could not tell you.'

Letty's face grew suddenly grave.

'Then you do know?'

'Yes, my dear. I have just come from a long talk with your aunt and uncle.'

'Did they tell you *everything*?' asked Hilda, with sudden vehemence.

The Bishop glanced at her kindly yet keenly.

'I heard the outline of what had passed. Would you like to give me your own version of the affair?'

'Yes, I should,' she cried, in the same vehement fashion; and then in a torrent came all the pent-up feeling which had been locked away in her heart ever since her fruitless endeavour to make her mother understand the trouble. She kept nothing back—her haughty temper, her angry words, her taunts and innuendoes, and her resolute system of stirring up strife. Everything was confessed in one passionate burst, and she ended up with a gush of tears that astonished her not a little, for she seldom remembered having broken down in like fashion since her veritable babyhood.

'And now I don't think I dare be confirmed next year—I don't see how I *can* answer for myself, after all this. Patty says it might be a help, but I think I should be frightened. And now you know all about me, I don't suppose you would have me. I am much too wicked ever to try and promise to be good. The first time I got into a passion, I should forget it all

again, and if I am to go on like that, I had better not make promises.'

'My dear, you have been baptized and brought up as a Christian child. You cannot rid yourself of the responsibility by holding back, though you may deprive yourself of the highest privileges and the strength and grace offered you to help you on your way. You may perhaps be a little young to be admitted to such full privileges. You are only just fourteen now, I think; but still, I have always thought you in advance of your years in mind and thought, and you can judge for yourself whether hanging back from your duty and declining to be confirmed would be any excuse for fits of passion, or would make you any happier.'

This kind of plain speaking suited Hilda better than any soothing or exoneration could have done.

'It is not that I do not want to be confirmed—it is not indeed. I should love to feel that I was really a member of the Church. I have been thinking about it a great deal these past days. But I was afraid I was not worthy to come—you cannot think how wicked I often feel.'

'But, my dear child, think a moment—is it because we are worthy that we are bidden to come to Christ? Is it our own good deeds that open the door to us?'

Hilda twisted her hands together, and knitted her brows.

'It must have something to do with it.'

'Must it? I thought I had read somewhere that "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."'

Hilda looked up quickly.

‘ You mean——’

‘ I mean, my dear, or rather I should say our Lord means, that it is not for us to let our sins keep us away—not the sins of which we know we are guilty, and of which we would fain rid ourselves. These need never form a barrier between us and our Saviour. The sins which keep us away, are those we will *not* give up—the angry feelings we cherish, the self-indulgence we feel to be wrong but cannot make up our minds to resist. These are the things that keep us away from Christ, whether we know it or not ; but a sin truly repented of never need do so, and I think, my dear, that you are truly sorry for the angry feelings and hot temper that have led you into so much that is wrong.’

‘ Oh, I am indeed, I am indeed. Only I don’t feel as if I knew how to cure myself.’

The good Bishop looked at the earnest face before him with a smile not untinged with sadness.

‘ Suppose, my dear, that instead of trying to cure yourself, you go to Christ in prayer, and ask Him to give you His grace, and the light of His Holy Spirit to lead and guide you, and help you. No man in this world of sin ever yet cured himself of a single evil desire. Can any of my little friends here repeat me the collect for the nineteenth Sunday after Trinity?’

The clergyman’s three little daughters exchanged glances, and presently Patty began a little hesitatingly, but more fluently as the Bishop made a sign of assent :

“ Oh, God, forasmuch as without Thee we are not

able to please Thee, mercifully grant that Thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”’

‘Yes, my dear, that is quite right, and I think, Hilda, that if you add that little prayer to your daily petitions, and pray it not with your lips alone, but with your spirit and understanding and might, you will find that angry passions are more easily subdued, and that you will not hang back from confirmation on the ground that you are afraid to come.’

‘Oh, thank you so much,’ cried Hilda earnestly; ‘that will be such a help. I never felt before as if I knew how to begin. I will try to be good now—I will, indeed. I don’t think I ever really cared before, and I’m sure I never got hold of the right way of making a start. I am so much obliged to you for explaining it. I do feel as if I understood a little now.’

Hilda was very quick at taking in a new idea, and she was very much in earnest in all she took in hand. The Bishop knew this of old, for he was an intimate friend of the family, and he felt greater hope than he had ever ventured to entertain before of this bright, self-willed girl, who had so much that was lovable in her nature, yet so little control over her faults and failings.

After a little pause Hilda looked at him with a change of expression, and asked:

‘Please will you tell us about Duke?’

The Bishop’s face grew gravely sorrowful then.

‘I fear there is no doubt that he will have to lose his leg almost at once. Either the blow or some mischief at work earlier has set up such acute inflammation of

bone and tissue that nothing but that can relieve him' and enable him to live in comfort for the time that he is spared to us. I have been hearing all about it, and talking to your parents, and they have consented to let me take him back to Avonminster with me, so that it may be done there.'

Hilda looked, as she felt, very much surprised at such an arrangement.

'Why will he go anywhere? I should have thought he was too ill to move.'

'It will be a little risk, but the doctor says he ought not to remain in this out-of-the-way place during the winter, when perhaps for days nobody could get to him; nor for the same reason ought the operation to be performed here, so far away from any but this young doctor, who would not like to be alone in the treatment of the case afterwards. So he must be moved to some place in or near a town, and as he greatly dislikes the idea of Ravensthorpe, and it seems cruel at such a time to press him to do what is needlessly painful, I saw him myself, and asked him if he would be willing to go home with me. You have heard, perhaps, that I knew Duke very well in his childhood. He is my godson, and I have always taken great interest in him. His mother and Mrs. Ellersley were school-fellows and intimate friends, and after his own home, no place has better claim upon him than my house. He seemed quite content to let me arrange matters my own way, and so he will be taken to Avonminster as quickly as it can be arranged.'

'Oh, that will be nice for him,' cried Letty eagerly; 'your house is *such* a nice place!'

But Hilda's face had flushed, and she said quickly and with a kind of remorseful vehemence :

'I suppose we have made this home so hateful to him, that he will not even try the other. Don't be afraid to tell me if it is so. It is just what we deserve.'

'Well, my dear, I know that there have been faults on both sides, and we all know that poor Duke is not the easiest of people to get on with ; but since you wish to know the truth, it is partly your doing that it seems advisable not to press him to go to Ravens-thorpe. He is willing to take all the blame upon himself—he has said nothing harsh of anyone but himself ; still, he has become convinced that it is impossible to get on with you all. He thinks that you have reason for your dislike, and does not resent it, yet the fact remains that he would shrink very much from being in the midst of you again. It seems a sad thing that this should be so at such a time, but we all have to learn in life that we *must* take the consequences of our own actions. If you had been kind and patient and good-tempered, perhaps all this pain might have been saved. As it is, the mischief has been done, and though you are very sorry, and would do anything to atone, Duke is too ill to understand, and in no condition to fight against the morbid feelings to which *he* has allowed himself to give way. And so there is nothing for it but taking him away from you all, and I am only glad that he will consent to be my guest, for he will then be not far away from you, when you return to Ravens-thorpe, as you soon will.'

Hilda's face was very grave. She felt keenly how much more widespreading was the mischief that idle

or angry words could do than was ever contemplated at the time.

The three younger children were looking wistfully at the Bishop. Presently Patty ventured to put the question they were all longing to ask :

‘Cousin Duke is not angry with us, is he?’

‘No, indeed, my dears; he has a great deal to say of what he owes to my little rosebuds. And that brings me to another question which I have come to ask. How would you three little cousins like to come to my house, too, and help to take care of Cousin Duke, who is a mighty particular gentleman whom he has in his room?’

‘Oh!’ cried Letty, ‘wouldn’t that be delicious?’

‘Oh, we *should* like that!’ said Dolly softly.

‘We wouldn’t give any trouble,’ added Patty eagerly, ‘for we know how to do everything for ourselves; and I do think we could help with Cousin Duke, because we have helped to take care of sick people in the parish before now.’

‘I do not doubt that you would be all very useful little women, and as even Duke himself does not wish to take his attendants from here with him, we should like to secure him some congenial society, and it seems by all accounts as though he enjoyed your company more than any other. So, if you do not think it will spoil your visit, you shall come at once.’

‘Spoil our visit?’ repeated Patty wonderingly. ‘I did not know we were going to have one.’

‘I thought it was a promise. Any way, Mrs Ellersley charged me to bring the “rosebuds” back with me, if their cousins could spare them, as she

wanted a little visit before they returned home. And as we hear that the sickness in *the* parish is almost at an end, it seems time to secure the birds before they fly away home to the nest.' And there was a look in the Bishop's eye which told Hilda that he had something in his thoughts that he did not tell to the children; but they did not observe this, and she could not guess what it could be.

'Oh, you are a nice, dear Bishop!' cried Letty, putting up her face for a kiss; 'we have so often said that we should like to see your house again.'

'And Mrs. Ellersley, too,' added Patty and Dolly in a breath, 'she was so very kind.'

Hilda was sorry that the children were going, but she would not spoil their pleasure by lamenting their departure. The twins made some outcry, and the elder ones were more or less astonished at the arrangement, for there seemed something a little odd about such young children paying a visit to the Palace. But Hilda was more and more convinced that something was going on that was not told them, and that the Bishop's visit to them, and the carrying off of the little cousins, was all part and parcel of it. Her mother's manner was very preoccupied just now, and people were so busy making arrangements for Duke's journey, and the move back of the whole party to Ravensthorpe, that there was no chance of getting a quiet word with anybody. The boys would soon return to school, and were making the most of the time that remained to them; and altogether there seemed nothing but bustle and confusion, whilst the bad accounts from the sick-

room threw a sort of anxious gloom over the whole house.

But the idea of going to the Bishop's was like a ray of sunshine to the three little Lincolnshire maidens, and the only thing that troubled the elder pair was the thought of saying a long good-bye to grandfather before they had accomplished their object.

Since Dolly's convalescence they had seen less of him again, but they paid visits to his room sometimes, greatly to the surprise of their cousins, who could not understand what the attraction was; and though he never made much of them, or asked them to repeat the visit, he did not send them away or seem vexed at the intrusion.

And now the last evening had come. They were to leave early the following morning with the Bishop, and Duke was to follow, with his father and the doctor, the day but one after, when all arrangements for his comfort would have been made. He was still very ill, and in too much pain to wish to see anybody at all; but he consented to all the arrangements made for him, and had even expressed pleasure in the thought that Letty and her sisters would be at the Palace.

It was strange, now that the time had come, how sorry all the children felt to say good-bye. Of course, they would see their cousins again before they went right away home; but it would not be quite the same as living with them, and it did not occur to them that they would ever pay them another visit. They had only been sent this time because of the sickness in the parish, and certainly it was not likely that such a thing

would happen again for a very long time, and then, if it did, they would be old enough to stay and help father and mother.

So altogether it seemed like a very long good-bye, and Dolly's eyes looked ready to brim with tears as she and Patty stood together at grandfather's door that last evening; for he had been really very kind, and mother had loved him very much, and it seemed so sad that he should still be vexed with father.

Dolly held in her hand a little purse that she had made for him, something like the one that Hilda had had given her on her birthday. She had made it all herself, for grandfather's use, and now the moment had come for her to present it.

But Dolly was too shy ever to be eloquent, and she could only summon up courage to lay it down on the table close to his hand and whisper: 'Please will you have it? I made it for you.'

The old man turned and looked at her, and then at the simple little gift.

'For me, child—your own work? Why, times must be changing if grandchildren are to make presents to their grandparents—it used to be the other way about. And what do you expect in return for this, eh? What is it you want me to do for you? Have you got nothing to ask?'

'Oh no,' answered Dolly quickly; 'at least—at least—not because I made you that. I didn't give it you because I wanted anything for myself;' and two tears of hurt feeling stood in the child's eyes.

'Well there, there, my dear, I do not suppose you did. I was only teasing you. But all the same,

there does seem something that you are wanting to ask me ; so let us hear what it is, and do not be afraid. I will not eat you.'

Dolly looked at Patty, and Patty looked at Dolly, and at last the elder little girl said softly :

'If you would some day come and see our own dear home, and father and mother.'

There was silence for a moment, and then grandfather rose, and began pacing up and down the room with his hands behind his back, as they had so often seen him do before.

'Child,' he said abruptly, 'were you charged by your parents to say this?'

'Oh no; mother only told us to love you,' cried Dolly, not quite understanding the drift of the question, 'because she always loved you so. And of course *we* want you to come. We always want to see people we love, and you have never been to our home ever since we have lived there.'

'It would be so nice if you would,' pleaded Patty, taking courage from the look on his face, which was not at all stern; 'I do so wish you would think about it.'

'Well, perhaps I will—there is no knowing. People do a variety of strange things when they begin to get into their dotage. Now, it is time you little travellers were in bed, so good-night, and be off, and you will see one of these days what wonderful things the fairies are going to do for you.'

The children retired, exchanging wondering glances. They were more and more convinced that something strange was coming to pass, though what it was going to be they could not imagine.

CHAPTER XX

CHARLEY'S ROOM

IT was very pleasant to the three little girls to find themselves once more in the Bishop's Palace. They felt as if an immense time had elapsed since they had spent a night or two there before. Indeed, they had seen so much and been through so many experiences during the past weeks, that they could hardly believe it was less than two months since they had first left their quiet home in the fens. Letty had grown brown and merry, and though never lacking in shrewdness and readiness, had a vast deal more knowledge of the world at her command. Indeed, she had learnt that it is better not to say straight out just what comes into your head, as that habit is apt to get people into trouble when they least expect it. Dolly had lost some of her almost foolish shyness, and was a shade less mouselike and demure, whilst Patty, still preserving her matronly little air, had learnt to play in a more hearty and childlike way, and the bracing air of the north had given all the children rosy cheeks and heartier appetites, so that they looked all the better for the change, and were eager to be allowed to share in the task of nursing poor Duke.

Mrs. Ellersley met them with sweet smiles and gentle words, and Mr. Lewin played with them in the garden and teased Letty because she had grown 'such a woman of the world,' and altogether it seemed very nice and home-like, especially when they heard at tea-time that there had been that very day a letter from father to the Bishop, and that the illness was very nearly over in the parish.

Patty was a little surprised that their parents had written to the Bishop, who was not really their own Bishop, and wondered how it was; but the other children thought it quite natural, for the sending of that splendid gift to the parish was quite enough to establish a sort of friendship.

After tea the little girls were sent for into the drawing-room, and found the Bishop and his wife there, and one or two callers. A nice, kind old gentleman, with very white hair, turned round with a smile as Letty advanced boldly to the Bishop; and she heard herself introduced (as it were) as one of *his* children, which she thought rather funny. But the old gentleman was very kind, and stopped talking with the Bishop to take her on his knee, and ask after her father and mother, as if he knew them; and as she saw by his dress that he was a clergyman, she felt quite at home at once, and chattered away very confidentially, telling him a great many things about herself and her affairs, and asking him presently about his parish and where it was.

And then the Bishop laughed, and said that all clergymen did not have parishes, and that her new friend was a Canon; and that puzzled Letty very

much ; and she asked if he really *were* a great gun, whereupon the Bishop and several more people laughed heartily, and the old gentleman said she had paid him a compliment.

Letty could not quite make it all out ; but she went on to explain that her father had once been a soldier, and had plenty to do with guns and cannons too. And though they all laughed still more at that, the child thought there must certainly be a connection between the profession of arms and a canonry, though her ideas on the subject were rather hazy.

All the visitors seemed interested in the three little girls ; and it was very kind of them, the children thought. When at length they had all gone, Mrs. Ellersley took her young guests to see the rooms that had been made ready for poor Duke's reception, and certainly nothing could be more comfortable or well arranged. The rooms lay all together on the ground-floor, shut off from the noise or bustle of the rest of the house by heavy double doors. There were parlour and bedroom opening into each other, and a room beyond for a servant, from which a door led to the kitchen and offices.

It was just as if such quarters had been made for poor Duke ; and it seemed as if they must have been occupied before by somebody who had been ill, for the couches, wheel-chair, and other contrivances with which they abounded were none of them new, and the whole place wore a look of recent occupation, which it could hardly have gained if it had been prepared for the first time for the cousin who was coming.

'How nice it all looks!' cried Letty. 'See, Dolly, the window opens into the garden; I should think the chair could be wheeled right out under that big tree in hot weather. It is much hotter here than it was up at Tarnside. It would be nice if poor Cousin Duke could get into the garden; he is so fond of being out of doors.'

'And it looks as if somebody like Cousin Duke had lived here before,' said Dolly with an inquiring glance at her hostess. 'Was there anybody, please?'

Mrs. Ellersley answered in a voice that shook a little:

'Yes, dear children; there was another invalid, who lived once in these rooms, which indeed were built for him, when he came back a helpless cripple to the home he had left so full of life and strength and hope. He went out to fight for his country and his Queen, and he did his duty well, though it cost him his life in the end; but he never complained. He would have given it twice over if he could. And it was here that he lived for a few quiet years, until he was called to receive the soldier's crown he had won so well—not for any special deed of daring, but for his patient waiting and faith.'

'Was he your boy?' asked Letty softly, laying her cheek against Mrs. Ellersley's hand.

'Yes, little one; he was our only son—our only child: but it was the heavenly Father's will to take him home many years ago now. So we must not be sad, for he was very ready to go, though he would have been willing to stay and work for his Master here, if that had been His will.'

'Was he very good?' asked Patty, with interest.

'He was a faithful soldier and servant of the cause to which we vowed him from his infancy—a faithful servant under Christ's banner, as well as under that of his country. He was thinking to the very last of others, and as he lay dying he said to me, "Mother, I have been very happy here, and so very, very comfortable. Don't let the place be shut up always when I am gone, but keep it as it is, and if some day you can let another poor fellow have the benefit of it, mind you do. I should like to think some other invalid would be as comfortable and well cared-for as I have been; and if you ever can do a good turn for one, think you are doing it for me. I should like to think there would be another occupant here one of these days."'

'Oh, that was nice of him!' cried Letty. 'Is that why the Bishop wanted to have Duke?'

'I dare say he thought of it. We have once or twice, since our boy's death, had a guest in these rooms, but not for a good while now, though they are kept always ready. Charley's old nurse is still with us, and she gives most of her time to nursing, generally now amongst the poor; but she will be ready to give all her time and skill to Duke, and the doctors call her the best nurse in Avonminster.'

'How nice it all is!' said Dolly. 'Please will you tell us some more about your Charley, if you don't mind talking about him?'

The mother did not mind talking of her long-lost son—just for the reason that to her he was not lost, but only gone before. She sat down, and drew the children round her, and told them stories of her boy,

beginning from his early childhood, and ending with his adventures in far-off lands, where he had fought for his country as their own father had done. And in the midst of one long story—too long to be quoted in full—of how Charley had nearly lost his life in an encounter with Arabs in Egypt, and how it had been saved by the gallant daring of a young cavalry officer, whose name he had never been able to learn, the little girls exchanged glances of wondering delight, and as soon as the story was completed, the ever-ready Letty cried out:

‘Oh, that was father! We know the story, too. Mother tells it to us sometimes, when father is not there. It was father who rescued your Charley—it must have been. Oh, how very nice! He never knew who it was, because he left him in hospital, you see, and had to march off with his troop directly, because they were ordered away up country.’

Mrs. Ellersley was much surprised, and asked many questions which seemed to put the matter beyond a doubt. And then she kissed all the children very tenderly, and told them how much she had always wanted to see Charley’s preserver; and it was all rather like a story, as Letty said, only it was difficult to realize that their father and the Bishop’s Charley were the same age.

‘I fancied he would be about as old as Cousin Duke,’ said Letty.

‘He was no older than Duke when he died, but that was many years ago now. I always think of him as a boy; but he would have been a man in middle life by this time, had he lived.’

‘Poor Duke will like hearing about him, I am sure. I wonder if he will get to be at all like him by living here. I think it must help people to be good to live under the shadow of a beautiful cathedral like this.’

Mrs. Ellersley smiled and sighed as she led the way back to the main part of the house. The children were sent up to bed, and she sought her husband to tell him what she had just found out about their father.

‘It will make another link,’ she said; ‘how pleasant it will be to have such people here! Do you gather that he will accept?’

‘I have great hopes that he will, especially if his present parish be offered, when vacant, to a man like Bolton. He will know then that the people will be well cared-for, and, by all accounts, he has got things into such first-rate order that he will be ready for a wider sphere elsewhere. What I told him of the poor in the parish of St. Lawrence seemed to move him greatly. He is exactly the man we want here, and I gather that the air of the fen-country does not suit his wife particularly well. The close proximity to her sister will be a great inducement to her, now that the silence has been broken, and I quite hope we shall get them to Avonminster, where certainly a wide field lies before them. However, we shall have them here in a short time, and it will be definitely settled one way or another.’

How astonished the children would have been had they heard these few words; but they were quite unconscious of what was going on around them; and their time and thought were given, for the most part, to making little preparations for the reception of poor Duke.

Everybody now spoke of him with compassion, and, indeed, it seemed as if there were only too sufficient cause, when the carriage drew up at the door of the Palace, and the invalid was carried in. The journey had been very trying, and he looked so terribly changed since they had seen him last, that Dolly ran away crying, afraid to go near him, lest he should be really dead, and Patty held Letty's hand tightly in hers, and dared not go forward to speak to him or welcome him as she had intended.

But, ill as he was, Duke was very brave, and he managed to open his eyes and smile at the Bishop's wife as she bent over him when they had got him on to the sofa in Charley's old room.

'It is so kind of you,' he whispered, in short sentences. 'I am quite ashamed—I do not deserve it—but I did not know how to say no—it was such a good offer.'

'Now, do not talk, dear boy, but lie still and rest. You have been sadly shaken, I am afraid—but that is all over now.'

'Everyone is so kind,' he murmured—'I cannot understand it. It hardly seems right.'

Then Letty ventured to show herself, and was greeted by a smile; but Duke did not try to talk any more, and lay quite still with closed eyes, until the bell began to ring for evensong, and then he looked suddenly up.

'Ah, the cathedral! I had forgotten how near we were. I wonder if I could hear the organ presently if the window were opened wide.'

'We'll try,' said Letty; 'it would be nice to know

where they were in the service. I dare say Charley often listened like that, and fancied himself in the cathedral.'

'It's the music I care for,' said Duke; 'it is such an age since I heard any except of my own making.'

The evening air was very still, and through the open casement there floated in the sound of the full-toned organ, and the sweet voices of the choristers. Patty and Dolly had gone to the service with Mrs. Ellersley, who seldom missed attending; but Letty kept her seat beside Duke, and held her prayer-book in her hand to see if she could follow all the time. She read little pieces of the service half aloud without knowing it, and presently, as the anthem sounded clear and full through the still air, she glanced at Duke and saw that there were actually tears fringing the long black lashes that lay upon the white cheek. Letty would not watch him. She stole to the window and stood there looking out into the garden, upon which the shadow of the cathedral softly rested. She felt somehow that this was a beautiful and happy place to be in, and she thought that Duke was feeling the same, and she wished her parents could see it all too.

Presently she became aware that there were voices in the room behind her, and she saw that the Bishop had come in and was sitting behind Duke. She did not try to listen, but some of their words reached her where she stood.

'That will be as God sees best, my dear lad—the issues of life and death are in His hands alone. We can but use the means He has given us, and leave the rest with Him. I would not wish for a moment to

deceive you. The means to be taken in the hope of affording you relief, may instead only shorten your span of life. No one can absolutely say what may be the result of the serious step it is necessary to take. But at least we know this—that whatever happens is the will of our Father above, and that even the fall of a sparrow is known to Him; whilst His children are ever watched over with the tenderest love.'

'His children! yes,' answered Duke slowly; 'but the question still remains whether I am one.'

'No, my boy, there is no question of that kind at issue. I myself baptized you into the Holy Catholic Church. You have been made a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven; and though you may have wandered far from the fold, nothing can rob you of that sonship, and the way stands ever open for the son's return to the Father's house—the way of the Cross.'

There was a long silence, and then Duke said faintly—for he was easily tired:

'At least, if one has to die, this is a good place to die in. One can feel that. I am glad to be here.'

'God is equally near us in every place, my dear boy, yet I understand your meaning. Our Father bids us use aright every means of grace, and surely there is much help to be derived from the feeling that here is a spot hallowed to His service for generations and centuries. It does not bring Him nearer to us, for that could not be with One who is ever close at our side; but it helps to raise our hearts to Him, and to realize the nearness of that holy Presence.'

'Thank you,' said Duke, still more faintly; 'I will try to think of it like that.'

Letty slipped away out of the window, not quite sure if she ought to have listened so long, as the Bishop did not seem aware of her presence. She felt rather sad, because she fancied they had meant that Duke might perhaps die when they took his leg off. However, it was very nice to think that he was so happy here, and that he liked being near the cathedral, and in the Bishop's house. Letty felt that she should think just in the same way if she were ill, and, indeed, she thought she should like to live always in a place as still and beautiful as this.

The garden belonging to the Palace opened by a little gate into another garden only about half as big. Letty had never noticed this gate before, because it was generally shut and locked; but to-day it was open, and she wandered in to see what it was like, not quite realizing that it belonged to another house.

She soon saw Mr. Lewin, who was walking there and giving some orders to a Chapter gardener, and when he saw Letty he laughed and said:

'Well, little one, and have you come to spy out the land?'

Mr. Lewin was always something of a tease, but Letty was not in the least afraid of him; so she called back: 'I am no more a spy than you are. I only came to see what it was like.'

'Exactly so—and what do you think of it now you are here?'

'It is very pretty, but not so tidy as the rest of the garden. Does it belong to the Bishop, too?'

'No, this belongs to the Canon's house that stands there—do you see? The garden adjoins that of the Palace.'

'And what *is* a Canon?—you are always talking about Canons here. It might be a fort, to hear you.'

Mr. Lewin laughed very much as other people had done, only he explained the matter afterwards.

'A Canon is a clergyman who is employed, so to speak, in the service of the cathedral. He lives in one of these big houses in the Close, and has to attend a certain number of services, and preach a certain number of sermons in the course of the year. Sometimes he is very much tied by his duties, and has to go every day; and then again he has very little to do, and can go and do parish work if he happens to have a parish as well, or chooses to help a busy clergyman. There must be at least one Canon present at every cathedral service, and so you see they take it in rotation to be responsible for being there—or, as we say, they are "in residence."'

Letty was much interested by this explanation. She always liked to know all that went on about her, especially if it had to do with the Church in any way.

'Then are you a Canon?'

'No, indeed, I am only the Bishop's chaplain.'

'I thought perhaps you were a Canon, and lived in the house this garden belongs to. Who does live there?'

The young man's eyes twinkled a little.

'Nobody just now. One of our Canons died a few weeks ago, and so the house has been empty.'

'Oh, has it? And what happens when a Canon dies?'

'The Bishop appoints another.'

'Oh, how funny! And who is he going to appoint this time?'

'Ah, that remains to be proved. We shall hear, perhaps, one of these days. Would you like to see inside the empty house? I have got a key. I sometimes go in to see that it is all right. There is a little furniture there that was bought in at the sale, and some pictures that belong to it.'

'Oh, I should like to see it,' cried the child. 'Is it as pretty as the Palace?'

'It is not such a big place, of course, or so grand; but it is a nice house enough, and very queer. I like it the best in the Close, after the Palace.'

And so the delighted Letty was taken into the rambling old house, with its mullioned windows and ecclesiastical structure, and all the carving both in wood and stone that made it one of the curiosities of Avonminster. The child was enchanted, and quite entered into the spirit of the thing when bidden by her companion to decide how she would arrange it if she were going to live there. She selected a charming little octagonal room for mother's special sanctum, and the big library with the carved bookcases fixed to the walls as father's study. There were charming wainscoted rooms upstairs which made the most capital nurseries, and plenty of airy bedrooms and rooms for every purpose.

'I should fit up that room downstairs for Cousin Duke, if it were really my house,' said the child in

conclusion. 'I want Cousin Duke to see father and mother both, but particularly mother. I'm afraid he never will, because we live so far away, and he is so ill, and we haven't a comfortable carriage to meet him at the station if he did come. We haven't a carriage at all now, only the cob father rides when he has long journeys to go, and the tax-cart Farmer Joyce always lends us if we have to send to the station. Father gave up the little carriage he kept for mother when the tithe went down so. And Cousin Duke could never drive in the cart.'

Letty had a great deal to say to her sisters when she saw them again about the nice, queer house, and she resolved that she would some day ask Mr. Lewin to take them all there. She thought the new Canon, whoever he might be, would be a very fortunate man, and would be very much pleased with his funny house; but it was not the time to talk much about such things to the Bishop or his wife, or, indeed, to anybody, for all the household was much absorbed just now in poor Duke, and there were doctors coming and going all the next day, making arrangements about the operation that was to be performed as soon as possible—as soon, in fact, as he had got over the fatigue of the long journey from Tarnside, which had been longer than he was well able to bear.

The children did not hear much about it, and they did not even know exactly when it took place. But on the fourth day of their visit Mrs. Ellersley came and told them that it was all over, and that Duke was sleeping quietly after it, and that the doctors thought he would do well. It was very sad to think of him so

crippled, but then the leg had given him so much pain that there was compensation in the thought that he would be easier without it, and though the little girls were subdued and grave they were not unhappy, especially as every account from the sick-room was more favourable than the last.

They knew that they should not be allowed to visit their cousin for some days, but as he spent his time mostly in sleep that did not much matter, as he would not miss them. They made many plans for reading to him and amusing him when he was strong enough to see them, the only thing that puzzled them being why no mention was ever made of their returning home. Mother said not a word of it in her letters, though they had asked the question more than once, and people here spoke as if they were going to remain indefinitely.

However, they were too happy to trouble themselves much about it, though they had not the remotest suspicion of what was in store for them.

CHAPTER XXI

THE CANON OF AVONMINSTER

‘MOTHER—mother—mother!’

The last ‘mother’ was a positive shriek, as Letty darted across the big room and sprang headlong into the arms held out to greet her.

The Letty of two months back would hardly have been capable of such a shout and spring; but this brown-skinned gipsy was a different-looking child from the demure little puss who had left her home in the fens for the first time some two months ago. And mother, holding her darlings in her arms, and kissing first one little face and then another as though she would never have done, saw with heartfelt pleasure the improvement in the looks of all three, and felt doubly thankful that she had been able to send them out of the infected air in the midst of which she had herself been working so long.

‘Mother! oh, mother!’ gasped Dolly, almost overcome by this wonderful surprise. ‘Oh, how did you come? Oh, I can’t understand!’

Mrs. Ellersley was smiling kindly upon the excited children. They had been summoned to the drawing-room a few minutes ago, and had come in to find

mother sitting there talking to Mrs. Ellersley as if they were quite old friends.

‘I came by the train, as you did, darlings; and you were out walking when we arrived, so I took off my things and had a cup of tea, and by that time you had come home, do you see?’

Oh, how delicious it was to hear mother’s soft, gentle voice, that sounded always the same, so sweet and soothing! The very sound of it stilled Letty’s impatient trembling and excitement. What did it matter how she had come as long as she was there?

‘I suppose it was done for a surprise,’ she said, drawing a long breath; ‘or somebody would have told us.’

‘Partly that, dears, and partly because if Cousin Duke had been very, very ill, we should not have come quite so soon, and we did not want you to be disappointed;’ and then the kissing, somehow, had to begin all over again, and in the midst of it Mrs. Ellersley stole away, so as to leave mother and children alone together.

‘And father?’ asked Patty wistfully, after another good hug; ‘I wish he could have come, too.’

‘He has come, dearest. Do you think I could have left him? He is with the Bishop now, and will join us almost directly. He needs the change even more than I do, and I feel that a rest is very welcome after all our hard work.’

‘You look so thin and tired, mother,’ said Dolly, laying her cheek against mother’s hand.

‘Well, I think I have come to the best place to get fat and rested. And we have not left a single sick

person behind us. Think of that! We had so much kind help—and so many letters for the seaside and convalescent homes, that all our poor, weak, getting-better people were sent off before we came away ourselves.'

'But I don't see how you could leave the parish,' said Letty, who did not remember such a thing having happened before; and mother smiled thoughtfully as she said:

'We are not quite essential to the existence of the parish, little daughter. But, of course, we could not leave it except in good hands. However, for the last fortnight we have had very efficient help there. The Bishop (not this Bishop, but our own of the diocese, who has been very kind ever since he heard of the illness we had) sent us one of his own chaplains down to help, and he is there now. The people are very fond of him, and as he is a Lincolnshire man himself, he understands their ways, and makes friends wherever he goes. He has been such a comfort to father. I hardly know how he would have got through, but for Mr. Bolton. He was so worn out with all he had to do; but he is better and stronger now, and very anxious to see his little girls again.'

It was delightful to hear real full details of the parish again. The children had questions without end to ask, and hardly noticed the slight preoccupation of mother's manner sometimes. Then they had so much to tell on their side that, though they often all spoke at once, it seemed as if there would never be an end to it all, and before the half had been got through, the door opened and father came in alone.

Oh, what a happy meeting that was for all! The weary and careworn faces of the parents lost the anxious look they had worn so long, and seemed to grow younger as they listened to the chatter of their darlings. It seemed strange to be anywhere but at home, yet there was something very home-like in the scene; and when Letty remarked, with a sigh of satisfaction, that there was something *very* nice in living near a cathedral—such nice things always seemed to happen—her parents exchanged glances, and a little smile and flush crossed mother's face.

There was a great deal to tell about poor Duke. The children had visited him for the first time that day, and though he was very, very weak, he had seemed pleased to see them, and told them to come again soon. He was getting on as well as anybody could expect; but it would be a long time before he could leave his bed, and Letty thought he would be sorry when he heard that they were going away.

'For I suppose you have come to take us home,' she said, 'and then we shan't be able to help to nurse him as we promised.'

'Well, dearies, we must see what we can do. We shall not be going home just yet, at any rate. The Bishop has kindly asked us for two or three weeks, and by the end of that time we must see what we can arrange.'

'So the parish has a rival, eh, Letty?' questioned father, with a smile. 'Is there room for more than one idea at a time in that little head now?'

Letty climbed on his knee and flung her arms round his neck.

‘I’ve got such a lot of things to think of sometimes that I don’t hardly know what to do; but, of course, the parish *ought* to be first, because it really belongs to us.’

‘Quite right, my little girl; never let new duties or pleasures make you careless of former interests. There is generally a way of adjusting rival claims if we give our minds to it properly. But we all have to face change in this world of ours, as you will find one of these days.’

But in spite of this and other hints of coming change which were dropped in the children’s hearing many times in the following days, it was not until mother came to them, and told them all about it in plain words, that they realized in the least the great change that was coming over their own lives.

Father was very busy all these intermediate days. He and the Bishop, and sometimes he and mother, were often out almost from morning till night. They once took the children with them to see some very poor people in a low-lying part of the town, and everything was so wretched that Letty asked indignantly who the clergyman was, that he let his parish get into such a state, and Dolly began wondering if some of the clothing made by them, or the money given by their cousins for the old people at home, might not be more wanted by these poor creatures here. They passed a little church by-and-by, and were told that it was the Church of St. Lawrence, and that it was the parish church of these poor people; but it was very small and dirty and wretched, like everything else round it, and the children thought it all very strange

and rather sad, having no experience of large towns, and the inevitable misery of the dwellers in the overcrowded districts there.

‘If father were Rector here, things would be different,’ Letty said to herself; but she little knew how soon she was going to hear some strange news upon that very subject.

That same afternoon, as the children were playing quietly together in the garden, mother came out to them, and asked them if they would like to come with her. They eagerly assented, and she led them through the garden, up to the very house Mr. Lewin had showed Letty the other day. The door was open, as if they were expected, and there were several Chapter workmen engaged about the place, cleaning windows and doing little repairs.

But no one was in the hall when they entered, and, as they all stood together there, mother looked round at them and said seriously, yet with a smile :

‘Children, do you know that this is going to be your home very soon?’

The children looked at her in mute amaze.

‘Our home!—how can it be our home?’ cried Letty. ‘Why, it is only Canons who live here, and the Bishop has got to make another instead of the one who died.’

But Patty understood a little better, and had not lived for nothing in the Palace all these days.

‘Oh, mother! do you mean that father is to be made Canon here? Oh, *now* I understand what people have meant when they have said such things to us.’

‘Shall we have to leave our real home?’ asked Dolly

wistfully, more distrustful of change than her sisters, and less pleased at the thought of it. 'Shan't we have a parish any more?'

This was a very serious question, and made all the children look eagerly at mother, and then she drew them to her, and sat down in one of the half-furnished rooms and explained to them very clearly and fully what it was that was going to happen to them all.

She told them that in Avonminster there were a great many parishes, one of which, St. Lawrence's, was miserably poor and sadly neglected. Not so very long ago, it had been only a little village quite out of Avonminster, and there had been plenty of room in the church for all the people, and no distress or trouble there at all. But now things had quite changed. Some mills had been built, little houses had been run up by the hundred for the hands employed there, a whole population had sprung up in a very short time, and there had been a difficulty about supplying their spiritual needs.

The living of St. Lawrence was a very poor one, not much more than a hundred a year, so that it was difficult to find any clergyman willing to accept it. Then it had occurred to the Bishop (the predecessor of the present one) that it might be a very good thing if one of the Canons of Avonminster would take it, and give his spare time to the poor of the wretched place. So this was tried, but unfortunately it did not seem as though the right man had been fixed upon. He tried for a time, but without much success, to get his parish into better order, and then, only finding himself disliked in proportion to his efforts, he had done little

more. He had fallen into bad health, and had been obliged to spend much of his time abroad, and during his visits to Avonminster he had had little leisure to visit St. Lawrence's. He had a curate working there, but no one curate ever stayed long, as the work was hard and the stipend small. So the place had got worse and worse; and now that the Canonry and Rectory were vacant together, the Bishop was most anxious to find a clergyman who would really give time and energy and thought to the poor neglected place, whilst his position as Canon would secure him a home in the Close, and give him sufficient means to do much good.

'And so you see, darlings, when the Bishop heard of father—and it was what these three little daughters of his said that first drew his attention to him—and learned all about him from our Bishop and grandfather and Uncle Marmaduke, he thought he should like him to be one of the Canons, and to look after this poor parish as well. He wrote about it a good while ago, and at first we hardly thought we could make up our minds to leave our dear people; but when we heard more about it, and when I found that the doctor there thought that both father and I should be better away from the damp of the fens, and we found how much work there was here that seemed to want someone to do it, we thought perhaps it was a call, and that we must look at it as such, and so we decided to come here and see for ourselves, and now it is quite settled. Father has accepted the Canonry, and the charge of St. Lawrence as well, and we shall all have to work very hard there, for, as you saw to-day, there is a great

deal to do, and it will take a very long time to get it at all like the parish at home, which we all think is the model; do we not, Letty?’

It was all so strange that the little sisters found it impossible to take it in all at once.

They looked at one another and at mother, and presently Patty asked suddenly :

‘Then we shall live near Aunt Hilda and grandfather, shall we not? Will they be glad?’

The pink colour came into mother’s cheeks then.

‘I think so, dear children. I have had a letter from grandfather about it. He seems very pleased that we are coming to be near them. He is coming over to see father one of these days, and the new house that we are going to live in.’

Dolly’s face was all aglow, but no more was said just then, only the two elder little girls understood better what made mother look so glad, and why she seemed so happy as they went over the house together, settling what rooms should be allotted to what people, and making charming arrangements for the future.

Mother smiled at Letty’s pleading for one room to be allotted to Duke, but as all the children cried out that it would be so nice, she did not gainsay them.

‘When you have seen him, mother dear, I am sure you will love him,’ said Letty earnestly. ‘And he wants to see you as soon as the doctor will let him.’

So far the invalid had seen no strange faces, and, except his father, no member of his own family had been near him. The thought of meeting any of them produced an excitement that had to be avoided, and the doctor’s orders were stringent. It was rather a

concession that his little cousins were allowed to run in and out, and pay him small attentions, and he had hardly done more than smile at them as yet.

‘He will like to hear all about this by-and-by,’ said Patty. ‘Oh, it does seem so strange, but I think I like it, only——’

‘Here’s the Bishop,’ shouted Letty, darting out. ‘Oh, mother has told us now, and we are so surprised; but it will be very nice living so near you; we shall be able to come and see you every day. It is so convenient that the gardens join.’

Mrs. Ellersley and father were not far behind; they all wanted to see the house again, and hear what the little ones thought about it. The children had noticed before now how fond the Bishop’s wife was of father, and they understood the reason why, although they had never heard her speak a word to him about how he saved her Charley’s life.

Next day the whole party went down in a body to look at the church. It did, indeed, present a sad appearance. Small as it was, it looked as if it were never full. There was dust all over, cobwebs lurked in dark corners, the altar-cloth was almost rotting away, and the windows were some of them broken, whilst others hardly admitted any light, they were so dirty and dull.

‘No wonder the people do not come,’ said Mrs. Ellersley; ‘I did not know things had come to such a pass. It is indeed high time there was something done. The church is a standing disgrace to us.’

‘It will be hardly a standing one much longer, if something is not quickly done,’ said the new Rector,

who had been examining the structure whilst the others had been inside. 'It is almost falling to pieces. I never saw such a place.'

'Can't it be mended?' asked Patty; and father looked as if he hardly knew what to say, whilst the Bishop said very decidedly that it wanted 'mending with a new one,' if only there were any way of raising the necessary funds. And that made all the party silent, whilst the children exchanged wondering glances, for they knew it must cost a great deal of money to build a new church. They wondered if father would have to do that, as well as look after all the people in the new parish.

'Avonminster ought to do something,' remarked the Bishop, as the party at last turned away, 'only there have been so many calls on its liberality lately, that it may be difficult to make a fresh appeal so soon again. It is one of those places that have increased too fast of late years; there seems no keeping up with the needs of the inhabitants, and this end has been the most neglected of all. We might raise a few hundreds in the Close immediately; but unfortunately hundreds do not go very far in the building of a church, and after that I should hardly know where to turn. Well, I suppose we must either patch up the old structure or put up an iron church for the present emergency, and trust to time to stir up the hearts of the people. I have always found them willing and liberal; but they have been heavily taxed since I came amongst them. I have preached liberality, and they have certainly practised it, but one cannot on that account be unreasonable in one's demands.'

‘Exactly; and the parish itself has small means of helping, to judge by appearances. There hardly seems a good house or a decent shop within its limits.’

‘I’m afraid the publicans are the only well-to-do people in this part of the town; and they will hardly support you very heartily. They will be afraid of the Band of Hope.’

‘Which is greatly needed, to judge by appearances. Even the little children seem to frequent the public-houses.’

‘We had a Band of Hope always at home,’ cried Letty eagerly; ‘nearly all our children belonged.’

‘Then you must see what you can do with these little folks here,’ said Mrs. Ellersley. ‘I dare say you worked a good deal amongst the children yourselves.’

‘Oh yes; but then we knew them all. It will be so strange not knowing anybody in the parish. I don’t feel as if I should ever know what to say to them—and there are such a lot of them, too.’

But the question of the church was, after all, the great trouble. It did seem so very melancholy, after their own pretty little home-like country church, to come to a dismal place like that, which no efforts could make cheerful or attractive, and which would not contain one-third of the people whom they would wish to welcome there. Letty thought it was as bad as the church at Tarnside, and gave an entertaining description of that place to the Bishop, her indignation at the ‘squire’s parlour’ being expressed in no measured terms.

‘We understand things better now, Letty,’ said the Bishop kindly; ‘and those old customs are passing

away. We like our churches to be free and open alike to all, with no grand pews for great people and narrow hard benches for poor folk; and if we ever manage to rebuild St. Lawrence's, I think we shall do better in that respect than seems to have been done at Tarnside.'

'Oh yes,' cried the child eagerly, 'we will make it like our church at home! Oh, how I wish I had a lot of money! it would be nice to begin building a new church directly.'

CHAPTER XXII

ST. LAWRENCE'S

AND what of Duke all this long time ?

Poor Duke ! he had suffered a great deal latterly ; yet perhaps no pain had been so hard to bear as the humiliation of feeling that his will, which he had believed strong enough to carry him through anything on which he had resolved, had played him false and left him a slave to his own pride and passion.

When Duke had first felt the craving for companionship and sympathy which had come to him at last after his long voluntary seclusion, he fought against it, and tried to call it foolish weakness. Possibly, but for Letty's sudden appearance, his pride would have stifled it at the outset ; but when he resolved to leave his retreat, and mix once more with his family, nothing was further from his thoughts than that he should ever be led into scenes of angry recrimination with his half-brothers and sisters. He thought that in recognising the folly and wrongness of his past conduct he insured himself against a repetition of it. He said that he bore no enmity now against his step-mother and her children, and he was confident that he should be

able to meet them all with perfect dignity and composure.

It certainly never came into his mind that it might prove too difficult to subdue angry feelings; and no misgiving troubled him till he suddenly found himself plunged into the midst of almost daily bickerings and recriminations with Hector and Hilda, whilst no effort on his part seemed to keep him from increasing discourtesy to his step-mother.

Duke was a gentleman at heart, and bitterly ashamed of himself for his rudeness; but resolve as he would to be different next time they met, the provocation of the moment proved too strong for him, and he repeated the offence time after time. Perhaps his bodily state accounted for more than he knew. His nerves were all on edge, and he was in no state to battle with himself as he might have done under other circumstances. During the latter part of the time he had made no effort at all to restrain himself, but had taken a sort of savage pleasure in saying every taunting thing that came into his head to enrage Hector and his hot-tempered sister; and when he received the blow that did such cruel injury, he felt no anger against Hector for it. He knew that he had brought it on himself, by deliberately striving to stir up the boy's evil passions, and he had generosity enough to beg most earnestly that no blame might fall on his brother.

Indeed, from that moment it seemed as if there were a change for the better in Duke's mental state. The scales were torn away from his eyes, he hardly knew how, and he began to see his conduct in a new light.

Consecutive thought was impossible in his present state ; yet he began to feel a perception of many things that were new and strange to him. The first of these, and perhaps the strangest of all, was a profound distrust of himself and of his own strength of will or of purpose, and the next an intense longing for some power outside himself in which he might put his trust, when his own will was powerless to help him.

Duke lived through long days and sleepless nights of pain, in which he had nothing to do but think ; and he did this in silence, sharing his thoughts with none, whilst realizing perfectly that his remaining days might indeed be few. The thought of approaching death was very solemn, the more so that he did not meet it now with his former bravado. Duke was far humbler than he had been ; he was yearning after peace and rest ; and so it was that when he was laid down in his quiet room in the Bishop's Palace, beneath the very shadow of the grand cathedral, he felt that here, perchance, he should find what he sought, if only it were not too late.

And now, after the operation had been successfully performed, and he was recovering little by little from the exhaustion of all he had gone through, he felt more than ever that he was in a happy haven of peace and rest. He could seldom talk, and not always even think, but he lay hour after hour listening to the chimes of the cathedral clock, as the hours passed by, hearing morning and evening the sounds of prayer and praise, chant, anthem and psalm, arising in sweet harmony from the ancient building. He learned to follow in heart the words, which were sometimes

faintly borne to him as he lay, until the beautiful liturgy of the Church, once strange and meaningless to him, became as the very language of the heart.

The daily visits of the good Bishop were a great help all through this time. He understood so well the faintly spoken questions, entered so kindly into the difficulties and doubts of the sin-laden soul, and pointed so clearly the way in which these doubts and fears might be laid at rest, that slowly and surely peace fell upon the worn and weary spirit, and Duke could say with all his heart, 'It is good for me that I have been in trouble, that I may learn Thy statutes.'

And with the new love of God gradually awakening in his heart, came also that love—its necessary accompaniment—a love of his fellow-men. As he lay upon his bed during the long, silent watches of the night, he would think of other sick and weary men and women, laid aside as he was, but unlike him, surrounded by no comforts, unwatched and untended, bearing alone their bodily pain, and with no one to come to them with words of hope and healing for their souls.

One night, as he was musing thus, wakeful and weary, for he still suffered much pain, especially at night, the door of his room was gently pushed open—it was standing just ajar—and a lady he had not hitherto seen stepped quietly over the threshold.

Had he not seen her before? Surely there was something familiar in those earnest gray eyes, so sweetly serious in their expression, in that calm, gentle face framed in its coronet of smoothly braided brown hair, and the smile that was like moonlight upon

water. Duke lay and looked at the apparition in silent wonder, and then all in a moment he knew who it was. Were not those Dolly's very eyes, that he had heard were her mother's over again, and was it not in the children's little album that he had seen that sweet and gentle face of the mother they so loved to talk about?

Duke had greatly wished to see her, but with his newly-found humility he had not dared to ask her to visit him; for was she not the sister of his father's wife, to whom he had behaved so badly, and might she not have heard the whole story, and feel that he hardly deserved to be noticed? He was still too weak for visits from strangers to be thought desirable, so no offer from her had reached him, and he quite thought she would rather keep away from one who was so violent and discourteous, so that her presence here at midnight perplexed him not a little, and he lay gazing at her, not attempting to utter a word.

She came forward, and laid one cool hand upon his throbbing temples.

'My poor boy, I am afraid you are suffering sadly to-night.'

He looked up gratefully; he was always very grateful now for the kindness and sympathy he had once held so cheaply.

'I don't know—not particularly. It's always worst at night. Have I been making a noise?'

'I heard you moaning a little, and tossing about. I came into your parlour to look for a book which I think one of my little girls left there to-day. I could not go back without trying to do something for you. Do you always have such bad nights, my poor boy?'

'Are you Aunt Dorothy?' he asked, lifting his hollow eyes to her face. 'May I call you Aunt Dorothy, please? I know I do not deserve to be considered a nephew; but I should so like it. I have thought so much about you, and wanted to see you; but I was afraid to ask you to come.'

The first answer he received was a tender motherly kiss—such a kiss as he had not felt upon his lips for more years than he could count. Sudden tears started to his eyes, though he held them back resolutely. It was so strange to find people able to love him after the manner in which he had behaved all these years.

'Afraid to ask me?—when my little girls have made us friends already? I have only been afraid to come, lest strange faces should tire you too much.'

'I think I am always tired now,' answered poor Duke with a stifled sigh; 'but it is the best rest to see you. How kind you are! but you must not stay; it is so late—you will be tired yourself.'

For his visitor had seated herself beside him, and was still stroking the aching brow with her cool fingers, that seemed to act almost magnetically upon him; and, though he almost asked her to go, his wistful glance told another tale.

'I will sit a little while with you first. My husband is still in the study with the Bishop; they have a great deal to discuss together, and I should only sit up and read in my room. I do not like to leave you without doing something for you. Shall I be in your way if I stay here a little while?'

'Oh, I should like it so much if you would! The nights are so long, and sometimes it seems as if it

never would be day. I like to hear the chimes every quarter, but sometimes even the quarters seem interminable, and there is nothing else to listen to all night long.'

'And you lie awake a great deal?'

'Very often, now that they have stopped the morphia; but I'd rather not have too much and be always dazed and stupid. I have plenty of things to think of now; and everyone is kind, much kinder than I deserve. I should be a brute if I complained of anything now.'

'Dear boy, I am glad you can be content in your trouble, for it cannot help being a trouble to be ill and crippled.'

'Oh, I don't mind that. I mean, not much; I am used to it. I brought everything on myself, as I think you must know. I have no right to complain. It is all my own doing, and I don't deserve half the kindness I have received.'

Duke spoke with energy and vehemence, anxious as ever to be straightforward and truthful, and not allow people to think him a victim; but he was still too weak to bear any kind of excitement with impunity; and he turned suddenly so faint that he could only lie back with closed eyes and gasping breath, looking ghastly in the faint light of the carefully shaded lamp.

The nurse slept close at hand; but Mrs. Rose did not call her, being too much at home in sick-rooms to feel alarmed or helpless in such a case. Under her tender ministrations, Duke speedily recovered, but he looked very white and shaken, and not at all fit to be left alone.

'I shall stay to see you asleep to-night,' she said, in answer to a look which, whilst full of gratitude, seemed to bid her trouble no more about him. 'I am a capital nurse for putting troublesome patients to sleep, as I hope you will soon find out. I shall not let you talk; it tires you far too much. I shall read quietly to you till you begin to feel more like sleep. Have you any book that you prefer to another?'

'If you would just talk to me,' murmured Duke faintly. 'It rests me so. I will not talk back; but I do so like to hear you.'

Some people might have found such a request difficult to comply with, but not so Mrs. Rose. Still keeping her hand on his brow, and stroking the wave of dark hair that lay across it, she began to talk to him in gentle fashion of the change that was coming into her life soon—of the removal to Avonminster, of the new house awaiting them there, and their duties in the poor neglected streets and alleys that lay around the half-ruinous church. Duke knew just enough of the matter not to be excited by what he heard, and indeed it would have been hard to grow excited when all was told so calmly and softly. He listened with dreamy pleasure to what was said, seeing in a misty way the squalid tenements, the lichen-stained walls of St. Lawrence's, and wondering how the good clergyman would get on with so wild and neglected a flock.

The thoughts of the poor and needy there chimed in with his musings of many days and nights; and again there came the question through his mind, 'Could nothing be done—could he himself do nothing? Were there no means in his power of paying back, in some

sort, the debt of gratitude he owed to someone—to humanity itself perhaps—for all the undeserved kindness he had received—he who deserved it so little ?’

But these reflections grew all blurred and indistinct, and were followed by a period of oblivion caused by sleep ; and when he awoke from the most calm and dreamless slumber he had yet enjoyed, it was with these words running in his mind, as though they had been with him all the night :

‘ Lord, remember David ; and all his trouble.

‘ How he swore unto the Lord ; and vowed a vow unto the Almighty God of Jacob.

‘ I will not come within the tabernacle of my house : nor climb up into my bed ;

‘ I will not suffer mine eyes to sleep, nor mine eyelids to slumber : neither the temples of my head to take any rest ;

‘ Until I find out a place for the temple of the Lord : an habitation of the mighty God of Jacob.’

What had brought those words into his mind just then ? He could not at first remember ; but presently there came the recollection of his visitor of the previous night, and the talk they had had together ; the things she had told him about the work soon to be commenced, and the difficulties that lay in their path.

Duke lay pondering for a long time, a light slowly waking in his eyes as he did so. His night's rest had refreshed him wonderfully, and had given him strength and power of concentrated thought, and he could see things in a new light this morning, and take a fresh interest in them.

Letty peeped in early on her way from breakfast to the garden, and was delighted to be called in, and told of mother's unexpected visit the previous evening. She was not at all surprised that Cousin Duke had been won over to the belief that she was the sweetest woman in the whole world, because that seemed to the child the only conclusion that could possibly be reached upon the subject; but she was delighted to chatter to Duke about the new house and new parish, now that he seemed well enough to enter into the subject; and when led on to do so, gave an eloquent description of the church, and sighed in lugubrious fashion over the difficulties that must beset them on every side unless there could be a new one built, and there did not seem the least hope of this.

Duke did not say much, but he lay and listened, with the same look of purpose on his face; and when the child's mother had come to fetch her away, and to renew her acquaintance with her patient of last night, he asked for pen and paper, and for the first time for many years penned a brief note to his father, whose visits were no longer paid every day, since all danger was now at an end.

Early the next day Sir Marmaduke appeared at the Palace, and was shown at once into his son's room. Duke had left his bed and was lying on a couch near to a fire in his bedroom. A small table stood at his side, with pen and ink in readiness. His face showed more of interest and brightness than it had done for many a long day. Despite the ravages of illness, which were more painfully apparent now than when he kept his bed, he looked more as his father

wished to see him than he had ever done before since the first unhappy alienation.

'It is kind of you to have come so soon, sir,' said Duke, waiving all questions as to his health. 'You will think it strange that I should want to see you on business, but so it is. I will not beat about the bush; I will go straight to the point. You once told me, after I had come home *that* time, that there was a considerable property owing to me since my majority, which was willed to me by my mother. Is it not so?'

'Yes. She was an heiress in her way, and half her fortune, £25,000, was left to you upon your majority. As we believed you dead at that time, I, as your heir, was supposed to have come into this fortune, but I never touched it. The proof of your death was not conclusive to my mind, although I had no valid reason for declining to believe the report. Anyway, I did not require the money, and made no use of it. When you appeared again I wished, as you know, to place you in possession of this fortune, but——'

'But as I wished to go on being dead to the world, I declined to have anything to do with it, nor had I any use for it. The question I want to ask you is this: Is that money lawfully mine now?'

'Undoubtedly so; it is yours to do with exactly what you will.'

'And you would not feel that I was robbing you—or the others—if I took it and used it for a purpose which would alienate it from the family?'

'Certainly not. It is your own, and your half-brothers and sisters have not the least claim upon it. If you should not survive me, or leave heirs, the other

half of your mother's fortune will pass to them. You need have no scruple in doing what you will with your own. I shall be only too glad to see you take an interest in anything again.'

'Thank you, it is kind of you to say so; and I am glad to think that the other half of my mother's fortune should always be yours and your children's, as I shall never survive you. But as for that which is absolutely my own, I have a plan in my mind for its disposal. I do not know if it will sound wildly chimerical to you; but to me it seems sober and sensible, though I confess the idea only came to me very recently.'

'And that idea is——?'

'To build and endow a church in Avonminster, in the place of that old St. Lawrence's, which is almost in ruins.'

'What, the church your uncle and aunt have to take in hand? I have heard something about it; but I did not know things were as bad as that.'

'I believe they are as bad as they can be. Father, do you see any valid reason why I should not do it? It would be such a pleasure to me; and perhaps I might be able then to feel that my life had not been altogether wasted.'

'Every important step requires careful consideration, Marmaduke; but on the face of it I do not see why you should not leave your money to such a purpose if you wish it.'

'But, sir, my idea—my wish is not to do it by will only, but to set to work at once. They tell me I may live a little longer yet, and I should so like to see it finished—I mean, to know it was finished—or, at

least, well begun before I have to die. It would be more to me than I can well explain to you, and what is the good of wealth to me now? I do not wish to act with foolish haste, but to me every week seems of importance, and if it could be settled soon, and the work put in hand, I should feel so glad. Will you think it over, and let me have your consent and co-operation?’

‘My consent you need not seek, but my approbation I give freely and fully, unless I hear anything I do not now know which could militate against the scheme; and as soon as I am convinced that there is no valid obstacle in the way, I will do everything in my power to hasten matters and get the work in train. You have taken me by surprise, and I must have a little time to make inquiries; but I will not keep you waiting needlessly, and if once the matter is settled, I will take care that the work progresses as fast as possible.’

Duke held out his hand with a gesture of gratitude.

‘You are very good. I do not know how to thank you. I hope to prove to you later that I am not ungrateful.’

‘There, there, I am sure you have talked long enough. I am glad to see you looking more like yourself; but you must not take advantage and do too much.’

‘I felt I must get this off my mind; but I will leave it in your hands now, and wait quietly till you give me a definite opinion. I shall have it to think of—for I believe I shall be allowed the privilege of doing it—little as I deserve it. But I will not keep you longer.’

It was very good of you to come so soon. Please give my love at home, and especially to—to—mamma, if she will let me call her so ; and if she would some day come to see me when she is in Avonminster, I should be very glad. I should so like to see her alone.'

'I will tell her, my boy,' answered the father, in a voice that betrayed a great deal of suppressed feeling ; and then they shook hands and Sir Marmaduke withdrew, whilst Duke lay back on his pillows white and exhausted, yet with a look of peace upon his face that perhaps had never been there before during the whole course of his strange and chequered career.

CHAPTER XXIII

AUNT DOROTHY

‘AUNT DOROTHY is coming to-day.’

Hilda looked up quickly.

‘Aunt Dorothy? Oh, I am glad! I do so want to see her. How do you know, Jessie?’

‘They said so last night in the drawing-room—Aunt Dorothy and Uncle Rose too—for a day or two. They have not been able to leave the Bishop’s before, there has been so much to arrange; but they will come now for a little visit. I think they will be here till Wednesday, perhaps.’

‘Well, I think it is about time we saw our relations,’ said Chi, looking up from his modelling, ‘I was afraid we should be gone back to school before ever it was accomplished. I want to see Uncle Rose. I think he must be a jolly kind of fellow—though he is a parson.’

‘Are the children coming too?’ asked Hilda.

‘I think some of them are—I don’t know about all. It did not seem quite settled. Duke likes to have them to run about for him now that he is better again. But I believe Dolly will come, at any rate; she is a regular mother’s child.’

‘I should like to see little Dolly again,’ said Chi,

who had taken a great fancy to the gentle little girl since the adventure of the cave. 'I've made her a jolly big work-box, full of partitions and things, for that everlasting parish work of hers. Grandfather saw me at it, and he has fitted it up with all the ridiculous paraphernalia that girls love to have whenever they sit down to sew. I should like to give it to her myself. She is such a nice little funny, shy, timid sort of creature, though she has good pluck enough, for all that, when it's wanted.'

'And we can give them the money we collected for them for their parish,' added Hilda; 'I dare say they thought we should have forgotten all about it, as so many things happened after that day to put it out of our heads; but we've got quite a nice little sum now. We will give it to them when they come.'

'Perhaps they won't take the same interest in the parish now,' suggested Jessie; 'don't you know that Uncle Rose has just been made Canon of Avonminster? They will live there now most of the year. They are going to leave Lincolnshire.'

'Oh, is that so? I heard something about it, but I didn't know if it had been settled. But he could hold his living and the Canonry as well, surely?'

'He isn't going to—at least, not that living. He is going to take in hand that wretched place down by the river in Avonminster, where all the mill people live. They say it is in a shocking state, and it is just because uncle is such a splendid parish priest, and knows so well how to organize a neglected parish, and get it into order, that the Bishop has chosen him. You know he went himself to see him at the time of

the fever, and he thinks no end of him ; and so he has got him to Avonminster now—and he will soon be a great man there, I expect.'

'And I suppose grandpapa has come round now?' questioned Hilda ; 'we always used to think he despised Uncle Rose.'

'Grandpapa never says a word,' answered Jessie, who was the general authority on all matters that concerned the downstairs world. 'He sits and listens to everything that goes on, but he never says anything himself—at least, not when I am there ; but I suppose he has come round, or they would not ask them here now. Mamma never does anything that he does not like.'

'It's my opinion,' remarked Chi, 'that he got very fond of those queer little girls in his own gruff way. They took an immense fancy to him, and I suppose he liked it.'

'I should have thought he would have hated it,' remarked Judy, suddenly poking up her black head from under the table ; 'he never cared a bit for any of us.'

Chi laughed and looked at Hilda.

'You see, my dear, we were brought up differently from those three little antediluvians, as I used to call them. We have always considered our elders as a species of natural enemy, however much we may have known they had our welfare and happiness at heart. It always bores us to be in the company of grown-ups, and one fancies that the antipathy is mutual. These little creatures regarded their parents as friends and companions, and wanted to share everything with

them. It seems queer, doesn't it? But they evidently looked upon it as the right thing. They didn't even object to grandfather's presence, and would actually go and see him in his own room after he had been looking after Dolly for a bit. I suppose the old boy really liked it—though I don't suppose he would admit it. Anyway, he has evidently come round completely, or things wouldn't be as they are now.'

'When we see Aunt Dorothy perhaps we shall understand better what makes the difference between her and other people,' said Hilda with a little sigh. 'I am so glad she is coming. She will know all about Duke, and nobody else will talk about him, except just to say he is getting on pretty well.'

It was very seldom that Hilda felt any interest in the guests expected at the house, but on this occasion she actually took the trouble to go into the garden and gather a nice nosegay, and take it to the spare room, and arrange the little vases there so as to look bright and pretty. She thought a good deal about Aunt Dorothy all the time, and pondered over a great many questions that she wished to ask her when she came, if she could summon up the resolution to do so.

She hoped that these visitors would be able to rouse Hector out of the strange state of silence and depression into which he had fallen. He had never been like himself since the day when he had inflicted the injury upon Duke that had led to such serious consequences. Sometimes he had been cross and irritable, sometimes unnaturally boisterous and noisy, but more often he was silent and gloomy; and though he never mentioned Duke, or inquired for him, he listened to every

word that was spoken about him—listened with an almost feverish intensity, and altogether was so different from his ordinary self, that Chi had openly expressed his opinion that it would be a good thing for him when the time came to go back to school. He did nothing but brood and mope at home.

No one had so far dared to ask if Duke would presently come to Ravensthorpe to live. It seemed unlikely that he would be sent back to the lonely Tarnside, at any rate this side of the winter, and yet he could not remain indefinitely at the Palace, kind as the Bishop was. The only other alternative seemed to be to come to the other house, and yet, after what had occurred before, nobody liked to speak of it. Their parents had not scolded them for the accident ;—Hilda would have been better satisfied if they had been more blamed—hardly a word had passed about it, the distress and confusion in the house subsequently preventing any such notice being taken. They were supposed to have been sufficiently punished by the result of their want of self-control ; and their mother seemed as reluctant to speak on the subject as Hector himself. Hilda, on the other hand, would have been relieved to speak out—and to Chi she did, and found him in accord with her. Both felt that it was unsatisfactory not to have their fault thoroughly admitted. It might be kindly meant to pass it over in silence, but it would have suited the girl better to have had it considered in all its real seriousness, and to have been helped for the future by the sense that their parents were seriously pained and alarmed by such outbreaks of ungovernable temper. As it was, it seemed as if the

children were left to fight the battle alone, not entirely sure if it was thought of much moment by their elders.

Nobody upstairs knew exactly when the arrival took place, but about four o'clock in the afternoon the door of the school-room opened, and Dolly and Patty entered, leading their mother by the hand, their faces illuminated by smiles of shy pleasure, whilst the Aunt Dorothy, whom Hilda had been so anxious to see, was looking round her at the new nephews and nieces with glances so sweet and bright that she won their hearts at once.

The Tremains were not shy, and they were all eager to welcome their aunt, and make her feel at home. Besides, she brought news of Duke, and they could talk to her as they could not to their own parents, for the very reason that she seemed to expect them to be interested and anxious about their brother, and gave them every detail as to his condition which she thought would interest them. She had brought messages from him to them all—messages which made Hilda's eyes sparkle with more than their wonted brightness, and sent Hector to the window to stare out of it, with his back to the room and its occupants. And then Chi showed his aunt a clever bedside-table and reading-stand combined, that he had been making after a model he had seen in a shop-window, and wanted to know if she thought Duke would like it. He had made it for him, but did not know if he might not have one of his own at the Bishop's.

And so there was no lack of conversation, for Aunt

Dorothy proved to be one of the few grown-up people these young folks had ever come across to whom it was a real pleasure to talk. And whilst they were sitting round the fire, and enjoying her company, the two little daughters slipped away silently, and paused outside the door, saying in a breath :

‘ Let’s go and see grandfather.’

Grandfather had not appeared in the hall when Aunt Hilda and Uncle Marmaduke had come out to welcome their guests, nor had any of them seen him so far. But the little sisters knew where he was to be found, for Punch and Judy had so often described this house and the position of all the rooms that they felt quite familiar with it already, and knew how to find grandfather’s study, as well as if they were still at Tarnside.

Their knock was followed by the gruff, familiar order ; but grandfather was not sitting in his chair as usual. He was pacing up and down the floor in a fashion that seemed to indicate a little disturbance of mind ; and when the children approached and held up their faces to be kissed, with the confidence they had gradually learnt, he did not welcome them with kind words, or even tease them in the fashion they had grown now to understand, though it had long been a trial to Dolly, but he just bent down to kiss them, and asked very abruptly :

‘ Where are your parents, children ?’

‘ Father is in Uncle Marmaduke’s study, and mother is in the schoolroom. Some callers came, and Aunt Hilda had to go to them, and so we took mother to see the others.’

'Can you fetch them both, and bring them here to me?' asked the old man, speaking almost sternly.

'Yes, grandfather, if you want them,' answered Patty; and when they stood outside the door again, she squeezed Dolly's hand tight, whilst the younger child looked up anxiously and said:

'Do you think he is angry still?'

'No; I am almost sure he is not. I think it is all coming right. You go and fetch mother, and I will tell father. We will wait for one another. Oh, I do think it is going to be so nice now.'

A few minutes later and the little party had assembled. Mother's face looked rather pale, though it was as calm and sweet as ever, only there was a brighter light in the eyes than was always to be seen there. She held Dolly's little hand in a very close clasp, and the child wondered whether it was her hand or mother's that trembled a little.

As for father, Patty thought with pride that he had never looked more completely the soldier than he did just then, with that eagle-look in his eyes, and the calm nobility of face that only comes from true heroism of soul.

It was mother's hand that opened the door, as she and her little daughter reached it. The next moment she was in the presence of the father she had not seen for so many long years, and not in his presence only, but folded in his arms in the close, silent clasp that meant more to her than the most eloquent of speeches.

For several long moments there was silence in the room. No one moved, and no one spoke. The

children fell back of their own accord, and father stood calmly by, waiting for what would come.

At last the old man gently put his daughter from him, and, turning to the husband, held out his hand.

'My boy,' he said, in clear, low tones, 'I have wronged and misjudged you, and I ask your pardon for it. I am proud to welcome such a son to-day. You were right, and I was wrong. You have proved that the parish priest can be the noblest soldier and the greatest man. Your children have taught us that.'

Patty at that juncture seized Dolly by the hand, and dragged her away, closing the door behind them as they retreated, though not before they had heard these words, which Patty understood better than her younger sister. But she felt that such meetings were not for their eyes, and she led her little sister away, pausing only when they reached the end of the passage to gaze at each other with sparkling eyes, as they exclaimed with the unanimity of feeling so common to them:

'There! it is done now.'

'Oh, I am so glad!' cried Dolly, drawing a deep breath; 'now there will be nothing to make mother sigh when we ask her to tell us a grandfather story.'

'And he will come and see us, and father and mother will be so pleased. Oh, I am so very happy!'

And indeed it seemed that everyone was going to be happy again now. The faces in the schoolroom were much brighter than they had been. Even Hector was looking more like himself, and eagerly asking Chi if

he thought Aunt Dorothy had really meant that Duke was better than he had been before that stone had hurt him.

‘I can tell you what they say about that,’ answered Patty, in her womanly little way. ‘They think now that he will be much more comfortable than he has been for a long time, as soon as he gets well from the operation. He will not have so much pain, and he may be stronger in himself for a little while, though he has something else the matter with his lungs that they cannot cure, so that he cannot get well. Mrs. Ellersley says they never would have dared to cut off his leg if it had not been quite necessary, because it might so very likely have killed him; but that as it is off, and he has not died of it, he may be much more comfortable than he has been with it on.’

Hector drew a long breath as of relief.

‘Well, that’s a blessing, anyhow. Not that it makes me less of a brute to do it, but it’s something to feel that it hasn’t made his whole life harder to bear than it was before. I can look the world in the face now. I have been feeling all this time uncommonly like Cain, I should fancy.’

These last words were rather muttered to himself than spoken aloud, though Hilda heard them and looked as if she well understood what he meant. She turned round to her little cousins and asked where Letty was.

‘Oh, she stayed with Duke; he wants somebody to run about for him, and he and Letty are such friends, it is quite funny. She talks to him all day long, and they have such games together when he is well enough.’

I don't know how he would get on without her. As mother was leaving, we had to let Letty stay. He could never have got on without them both.'

'He has the Bishop and Mrs. Ellersley.'

'Yes, of course; and they are just as kind as they can be; but you know they are *very* busy all day long. I never knew before what a *lot* of things a Bishop has to do, and he is often away, and then she is busier than ever, doing things for him and seeing to letters. You should just see the letters that come in and go out. I should think there must be hundreds sometimes. Oh, I think it is wonderful that they ever have any time at all to notice us, or to go and sit with Duke; but they always manage it, they are so very kind. But, of course, mother can be there oftener, and so can we.'

It was quite interesting to the cousins to hear all about the life at the Palace, and especially about the new parish and the house in the Close that was so soon going to be their uncle's. Patty was very eloquent about both, and the description she gave of the church set Chi whistling, and by-and-by, at a sign from Hilda, he brought out a bag of money and a list of names, and threw it across into the lap of the astonished Patty.

'There you are; we agreed on Hilda's birthday to make a collection for the parish, and we've not forgotten it either. You'll find nearly twenty-five pounds in there, and you may do just what you like with it. Perhaps as this new parish seems so much worse off than the old one you would like to keep it for that.'

Dolly's eyes were sparkling with gratitude, and

Patty's fingers quite trembled as they unfastened the string of the little bag.

'Oh, how kind you are! how very kind! I never thought any more about it—and you gave us quite a lot of money then—we have it still. Dolly, think—what shall we do with it all? Why, we shall be able to give a nice present to every single person in the parish when we go to say good-bye. Oh, that would be nice, because it would be like leaving a keepsake behind us—although it would not be really our present exactly, though it would seem like it, and be just as nice, for it is so kind of other people to care for our parish, and so good of you to collect for it.'

Chi laughed in his good-tempered way.

'Well, I think it was about time we lazy beggars began to think of something beside our own amusements, and it was precious little trouble; everybody was pleased to give something to help the parish in which the fever had been. Yes, I suppose, perhaps, it ought to go there, as it was collected for that object. We shall have to see what we can do about that new parish. It seems as though it would take a fortune to set that in working order.'

Patty sighed and shook her head.

'We shall have to wait and see what can be done. People are very kind, but father says it will be uphill work for a great many years to come.'

'I wonder he cared to tackle it,' said Hector.

'You see, it was just because it *was* so bad that he felt he must try. He could not bear to think that he refused a thing, if he could do good by taking it. He thinks he *can* get it right by-and-by, mother says, and

so he has taken it. Clergymen always have to do that. It is something like soldiers, I think, only in a different kind of way. They go where they are sent, without asking or thinking if it is pleasant, or if they will like it. I know that is what father feels about it. Mother said so. As if it had been a call, and he had no choice but to obey.'

'Your father's got the right sort of grit in him,' cried Chi with boyish enthusiasm. 'I always thought so by what I heard. I think he is a splendid kind of chap.'

The children were not used to hear their father spoken of in these terms, but they knew their cousins' ways and were not displeased. And when, as days went by, it appeared that their parents were thoroughly appreciated by the whole party, they were quietly happy and innocently proud. It was so nice to have father and mother coming in and out of the school-room, always welcomed, never thought in the way, their opinions asked by the boys as if they really valued them, and their company solicited on many walks and drives which had hitherto been taken by the juniors alone.

Hilda made of her Aunt Dorothy her first confidant out of the circle of her brothers and sisters, and very great was the help she obtained from the gentle counsel and advice thus received. Her aunt did not bid her put away painful misgivings and anxious thoughts as being unsuited to her years, and unnecessary in one who was in the main a well-behaved girl; nor tell her that she would understand better as she grew older, and had better wait till she had more knowledge before she troubled her head with hard

questions beyond her present capacity, or worried herself over youthful faults that would cure themselves in time. This kind of thing, of which Hilda had heard much, was not what Aunt Dorothy taught her. She was in full sympathy with the girl's eager desire to own her fault, to admit the besetting weaknesses of her temperament, and find the way to check them. Hilda had been well taught, in a conventional way; but the truths thus learned seemed as dry bones into which no breath had been infused. Her little cousins had done something towards arousing her to the sense that there was a living reality behind the dry forms, and the Bishop's words had proved even more helpful. But it was only when she could pour out her whole heart and confide everything to the sympathizing ears of her aunt that Hilda really found the missing clue, and felt that she knew where true peace and joy were to be found. And as she was very much in earnest, and never did anything by halves, this knowledge came upon her with a sense of gladness and brightness beyond anything she had experienced before. Good for her had come out of what had seemed to be evil. She only trusted it might be so with her brothers also.

CHAPTER XXIV

ST. URSULA'S

'FORTY thousand pounds!'

Letty stood absolutely aghast at the magnitude of the sum. She could not realize in the least how much it could be. It sounded like a mine of inexhaustible wealth.

Duke, lying on his couch, surrounded by papers that the morning's post had brought, looked at the child in a sort of quiet amusement. She had surprised him in the midst of his business correspondence, and he had told her part of the contents of the letter he had in his hand.

'Forty thousand pounds! And is it really all yours, Cousin Duke?'

'Yes, Letty. Indeed, there is more, they say, only I consider that a part of it ought to belong to my father, so that I hardly count it in. I did not expect it would be nearly so much; but you see, if money lies out at interest it goes on accumulating, and it is a great many years now since my mother died, and there it has been, just getting more and more. So now all of a sudden I find myself a rich man. Do you think it is a pleasant sort of feeling, Letty?'

'I don't know. I never felt it myself, so I can't tell ; but I should think it might be. Sometimes I think I should like to have a whole lot of money. But why did you not know about it till to-day?'

'Well, I did know something about it, but I did not care. I had nothing to do with it, and I thought my father ought to have it, because I had made him believe once long ago that I had been drowned. If I had died then the money would have been his, so for a good while I decided never to claim it. But now I have changed my mind, and he is good enough to be pleased.'

'Well, that's all quite interesting, I think. You are an interesting person altogether, Cousin Duke. And why did you decide to take the money? And what are you going to do with it?'

Letty put her questions with the most ingenuous good faith. She and Duke were now such friends that she did not feel it necessary to stand on the smallest ceremony with him. He looked at her with a humorous light in his eyes that had never shone there till latterly, and instead of answering, he asked :

'Tell me what you would do if you had a fortune left to you all of a sudden.'

Letty stood considering for a few moments, and then she answered with characteristic decision :

'Well, after I had bought a beautiful present for father and mother, and everybody I cared for here and at home—and the Bishop, too—I should give all the rest to building a new church for our new parish, for I think that that horrid old mouldy place is a perfect disgrace—and the Bishop says so, too.'

Duke's dark eyes rested on her with a smiling look of speculative curiosity.

'Bravo, Letty! I believe you would, though you are full young to develop a taste for dabbling in bricks and mortar—though, perhaps, that is not the attraction with you. And now what do you think I am going to do with all this vast mine of wealth? I will give you three guesses.'

Letty looked up and laughed. She dearly loved guessing, and had a tolerable faculty for hitting the mark.

'I guess you're going to build a hospital for people with bad legs. You said once that you should like to.'

'Number one—wrong—though you might have made a worse shot. I believe I did think of something of the kind once.'

'Perhaps you want to build yourself a house to live in, where you can have your big dog to live with you, and everything that you want, too.'

'Bricks and mortar again—evidently you think I am determined to build. Well, your second guess is wrong, and you have only one more left. You must think very carefully before you commit yourself.'

Letty looked up into his face, and something she saw there brought a look of eager excitement into her face. A bright smile dawned in her eyes, which was met by an answering expression in his. She gazed at him with parted lips, and the colour came and went in her face, and at last she made a bound and sprang right upon him, clasping her arms round his neck, whilst she cried out with a sort of breathless rapture:

'I know now—I'm sure of it. You are going to build us a church in our poor new parish. O Duke, Duke! dear Cousin Duke—how I do love you!'

He held her with one arm as she nestled up against him, and stroked back the little curls that clustered round her brow.

'So you think that is a nice thing to do with it, do you, Letty? It is just what you would do yourself, so it must be right, must it not?'

'Oh, Cousin Duke, I do feel so happy! Please tell me all about it. What made you think of it first?'

'I think perhaps it was lying here, so near to the Cathedral, and feeling what a beautiful thing it was to have places where every day the bell called the people together to worship God, and to pray for the sick and suffering. Or else it was your mother's words, or the wish I have been feeling for some time to leave something better behind me than an absolutely wasted life. You will hardly understand, little Letty, but I have been thinking a great deal as I have lain here and when I first heard all about St. Lawrence's, and the need there, it came into my head that this might be the thing that was sent me to do. And so I asked my father about it, and he was very kind, and I have received to-day his hearty approbation, together with an exact statement of my own property. I find I have nearly twice what I expected, and so, you see, there will be enough to do all, and more than I had dared to hope at first.'

'More?' questioned Letty, opening her eyes wide. 'More than a church, do you mean? Oh, how good you are!'

'Well, we must think about it, Letty, and you must give me the benefit of your opinion now that we are alone together these next days. What does a parish want most after a church, do you think?'

'A school,' answered Letty promptly.

'Why, to be sure—what a head you have! Do you think there is a decent school in St. Lawrence's?'

'No, a very bad one; and I heard them say that the School Board was coming if nothing was done soon, or something like that. The children mostly go to a big Board School in another parish, but there is hardly enough room for them there, and so the Board is going to enlarge that school, or build another soon, and the ratepayers won't care about *that*.'

Duke's face lighted with amusement, as it often did when Letty aired her little bits of second-hand knowledge, with the wisest look in the world. He took a keen pleasure in drawing her out, and getting her to talk in her grown-up way.

'But if the Board will build schools, anyway, why should we trouble about it? Would it not be better to let them do it? Don't you approve of the School Board?'

Letty screwed up her face in a queer little grimace, and looked very wise indeed.

'It isn't exactly that—I believe the School Board does a great deal of good; only, you see, a clergyman *does* like to have his own school under his own management, and be able to see that the children are taught their catechism and all that kind of thing, and have the Bible read every day. I don't know much about Board

Schools, because we didn't have one; but I know it would be much nicer to have our own. Only, you know, I don't want to beg—I shouldn't have said a word if you hadn't asked me.'

Duke laughed again; he looked as if he quite thought with his small counsellor.

'All right, Letty—we are agreed again as usual. I feel, myself, that whilst one is about it, it would be far the most satisfactory way to do the whole thing handsomely. I think a man like your father ought to have his schools under his own control, and not to be at the mercy of a Board, which may or may not value his opinion and consult his wishes. Now look here—would you like to know what my father has found out for me, and what he suggests as to the commencement of the undertaking?'

'Oh yes, please,' cried Letty eagerly, 'I should like to know every single thing. Please tell me all about it. It is so interesting.'

Duke was eager enough over this new plan of his to be pleased to communicate its details to somebody; and though Letty was but a child, she was so keenly interested that she made, perhaps, as good a confidant as any he could have found.

'Well, it seems that after I had spoken to my father about it, he made inquiries and came to the conclusion that the church was really needed; and then he himself visited the place, and has found what he thinks will be a good site for it.'

'Do you mean a piece of ground to build the new church on? You do not mean to build it where the old one is?'

'No; he says there would not be room enough, and the old one will be wanted all the while the new one is building. He has found a place he thinks will do much better. It has been an old-fashioned country house, and has some land round it—about fifteen acres. It is in the parish, and has come into the market. The property has been so much spoiled by all the miserable tenements run up near it, that its value has greatly decreased, and as it does not lie on the right side of the river for the mills, building contractors do not seem eager to buy it to put up more houses on it. There are almost too many poor houses built as it is, and my father thinks that I could get this property as it stands for about £3,000.'

'Yes, and what then?' asked the eager Letty.

'He thinks that the house itself, which is in fair repair, and not too large, would make a good clergy-house, or rectory, or whatever you like to call it; and he tells me that for twelve or thirteen thousand pounds one can build a good big parish church, and it would take about ten more to make up a sufficient endowment with what St. Lawrence's has already. So you see the whole thing could be done well for less than £30,000, and it would leave us £10,000 for our schools, and a little cottage hospital which I should very much like to add, if we can make the money go as far. Then there would be space near to the church for all the buildings—they could be built in a kind of quadrangle, perhaps, so that they would be all as it were under its shadow. We must try to get a nice peal of bells for our tower or spire. I should like to think that the poor people, toiling all day at their work, had something sweet to

listen to sometimes, and were reminded of their church even when they could not go to it.'

Letty drew a long breath.

'Oh, Cousin Duke—you do have nice ideas! Have you talked to father or mother about it yet? Or have you thought of it all by yourself?'

'No one knows except my father and you, so far, Letty. But I have so much time to think as I lie here, that I ought to be able to make nice plans. I'm afraid it all sounds brighter than it will turn out in the working. It will be no light thing, I believe, really to carry it through. And the trouble, I suppose, will fall upon your father.'

'He will not mind,' cried Letty eagerly. 'Oh, I do wish he were here, that we could tell him all about it! When can you begin, Duke dear? And how long does it take to build a church?'

'Ah, that is the worst of it—it is such slow work. I wish it were not'—and Duke sighed—'for I should so like to know that it was opened and consecrated before—— My father says that it will be impossible to begin building this side of the winter; the formalities could not possibly be got through in time; but he says he will do his utmost to hurry them on, and that if we have an open winter, he hopes to have the foundations dug out by February, so that the stone can be laid, and the building set in hand at once, and then the outer walls will be up before the frost comes to stop the work again, and possibly by the following Easter, or Whitsuntide, the church might be consecrated and opened for service, even though there might be still some work left to do.'

Letty sat listening and considering.

'Not next year—only the year after next. Oh dear, it *does* seem a long time to wait, Cousin Duke!'

'It does indeed, Letty; but I believe that will really be very quick work—quite as quick as one could possibly expect. Well, we must be patient; but I do wish it could be begun quicker. When once the men are at work one feels something is going on; but till February, it seems only like waste of time.'

Letty sat staring out of the window.

'I was trying to remember what mother once said to somebody who felt like that. It was nice—only I don't know if I can say it right. I think it was, "They also, serve who only stand and wait;" do you think that is like you, Cousin Duke?'

'Well, Letty, there does not seem much else for me to do, so I hope it is service; but one can't help thinking of the years one has wasted.'

'I think you will make up for them,' cried Letty, her face lighting up again with sudden animation. 'Now tell me some more about the church. Will it be called St. Lawrence, like the old one?'

'I have been thinking about that, too. I don't quite know if there is any rule about that kind of thing; but I think I should like to have another name for ours.'

'What name?' asked Letty eagerly; 'I don't think I care much for St. Lawrence.'

'I should rather like to call it St. Ursula, after my mother. You see her name was Ursula, and it is her money that does it all, really. Should you like that?'

'Yes, I think I should,' answered the child. 'It seems nice it should be called after your mother. Do you think she would have been pleased if she had been alive? Do you remember her very well, Cousin Duke?'

'Not very well, but I remember a good deal. I was very fond of her. I think she would like her fortune to go to an object like that, and I should like to feel that her name was still remembered.'

'And you will stay here always now, I suppose? You will not care to go back to Tarnside any more, will you? You will want to be very near St. Ursula's, to see to things. Perhaps on fine days you could drive out and see how they are getting on—next year I mean, when they are at work. That would be nice, wouldn't it, Cousin Duke? And I would go every day, and tell you exactly what they had done.'

But Duke's face was not responsive as usual.

'I should like to think that I should never leave this place. I feel as if I should be lost without the cathedral; but you see I cannot trespass indefinitely upon the Bishop's hospitality, and when I am really out of the doctor's hands, and fit to move, I shall have to think seriously what I am to do. I suppose it may end in my moving to Ravensthorpe—if they can tolerate the idea of having me there after what has happened.'

'Should you like that?' asked Letty.

'I should like better to stay here; but I would not wish to do anything to pain my father. It is not that I should mind being with them again—I think all that old bitter, jealous feeling has been quite knocked out of

me; but I do so like the quiet and calm of this cathedral city. I should so miss the chimes, and the peal, and the sound of the chanting and the organ. I suppose it may be weak to fancy it really makes any difference, but it seems to me that I should like to die literally under the shadow of the church, and if I once go away, I know there is a chance that I may never be able to come back any more.'

'Then, Cousin Duke, you *shan't* go,' cried Letty with sudden energy. 'At least, I mean, I don't think you need, if you will only come and stay with us. I'm almost certain father and mother would be as pleased as we should. Mother is *so* fond of you, and they are always so glad to do anything for anyone who is ill and wants help. You know, Duke, you are our relation—a cousin is next to a brother—and it would half spoil the pleasure of the church if you were not here to see how it got on. Oh, I know they will be so glad; and I think you would like it too. You know we have a room we always call yours, and there would be no sense in that if you did not live in it. Cousin Duke, don't you think that would be a nice plan? Do say "yes."'

'So nice, Letty, that I am half afraid to think too much about it. You see, it is rather a serious thing, taking a log like me into any household; and for all that you have adopted me as a cousin, I am only a distant one really, and have no claim.'

'Oh, *that* doesn't matter in the least,' cried Letty, with a sort of lofty scorn. 'Father and mother don't think in that way. They say that everyone has a claim who needs their help. Besides, are you not

going to build us a church? And anybody could see that it would half spoil it all if you could not be there to see or hear about everything, just as it turned up.'

'Don't let that be the reason,' said Duke hastily; but the idea of finding a home with these newly-found relatives in this calm and holy place was so inexpressibly sweet to him that he hardly dared to dwell upon it too much. His dread of the noise and bustle inseparable from a large family party and a gay house full of company was painful in its intensity, and he was not fit to stand the strain of the excitement which must inevitably follow upon a return to his father's house. He had braced himself to do his duty unflinchingly, should it come to him in that form, but he was conscious of feeling that it would be about the hardest form it could take, and Letty's words roused a thrill of hope of which he was almost ashamed.

'You can hear the organ and the singing almost better from our house than from this,' added the child, after a pause for consideration. 'I shall talk to mother about it the very moment she gets back.'

Duke said no more, nor did Letty allude to the subject again. The days flew rapidly by, each bringing its little incidents of more or less importance to Duke. Once it was a visit from his step-mother, in which the peace was sealed between them once and for all, never to be disturbed again. Next it was Hector and Hilda who stood at his side, to beg his pardon and receive his forgiveness, whilst all the while he averred that he was the one most to blame. Then it was Chi, with

his ingenious contrivance for the comfort of the invalid; or the twins, eager to see him once again, and to make certain that he was not a kind of phantom brother, who appeared and disappeared at will, without rhyme or reason.

It was pleasant to Duke to receive visitors in this fashion, and to feel that the cloud had passed quite away, and that he was once more one of a family party. What was said to friends of the family who had long believed him dead he never even asked. He knew that his father had *savoir faire* enough to carry off all awkwardness in the best possible way, and he had lost the morbid self-consciousness that had so long been his bane in the wider range of interests and the desire after usefulness which had lately grown up within him.

He was happy, as he had never thought to be happy again, and there was still a new happiness in store for him, of which he only heard on the eve of the departure of his little cousins and their parents for Lincolnshire, to which place they were going for a couple of months to wind up affairs there before taking possession of the new home and parish.

Duke was lying alone in the dusk, wondering what would be the next change for him, when his Aunt Dorothy, as he always called her, came softly in and sat down beside him.

'Duke, dear boy,' she began in her gentle way, 'I want to have a little talk with you. We have been so busy all this time with thinking and talking about St. Ursula's, and all the things connected with the new church and parish, that there has been no time to

discuss other matters, especially those which concern yourself.'

Duke looked up quickly, and then his eyes sought the fire.

'I suppose I had better make up my mind to Ravens-thorpe,' he said quietly. 'I dare say when I have grown used to it I shall like it, and I wish to do right and follow out my father's wishes; and I fancy he expects me to return there as soon as I can get leave to take the journey. It is very kind, indeed, of the Bishop and Mrs. Ellersley to have put up with me all this time, but I know I ought to be going now.'

'Well, Duke, that is just what the doctors say you ought not to do. They are much set against your leaving Avonminster. They wish to keep you under their own care still, and they are of opinion that you should never winter at Ravensthorpe.'

'Why not?'

'Because, though it is not so very many miles away, it is very much colder than this place. It is on high ground, and is swept by the east winds; and it is on clay, and is damp as well as cold. Avonminster, on the other hand, is warm and sheltered, and you have been so much better for leaving the cold of the north and coming here, that all agree in deciding that you should remain in a place that suits you; so, though your father is sorry not to have you at home, he entirely acquiesces in the verdict of the medical men.'

Duke drew a long breath.

'Well, I can't say I am sorry, for I have never been half so happy in my life as I have been here; and though it may have been a foolish fancy, it has always

seemed as if the place itself added to my happiness. I could not bear to think of leaving it. But if I am to stay, what is going to be done? I cannot live on here indefinitely, of course.'

'Well, that is what your father says, though the Bishop says you are welcome to stay as long as ever it is convenient for you to remain; but we have held a family council, and we have come to the conclusion that the best thing to do will be for you to make a home with us as soon as we settle in Avonminster; and if you will agree to this, the Bishop insists that you remain in your present quarters till we come for good, which will be some short time before Christmas. Do you think you could be happy with us? My little girls have set their hearts upon having you "for a brother," as Letty phrases it, and it would be a great pleasure to my husband and me if you would consent to come to the new home, which is so much too big for our small party. We would not be in your way; you should have plenty of solitude; but we should feel that you were one of us, and——'

But Mrs. Rose got no further, for Duke suddenly held out both his hands, and his whole face quivered as he exclaimed:

'Oh, Aunt Dorothy! I don't know whether I ought to say "yes" or "no"; whether I ought to inflict such a charge upon you; but I can't help it, I must accept. It seems as if it were just the greatest peace and happiness. Only I am ashamed—I do not know how I can ever thank you.'

It was her turn to stop him now, which she did by a kiss.

‘There must be no question of thanks between us, dear Duke. We have never tried to thank you for what you are doing for our poor, because we know that it is done not for us, but for them, and for the sake of One who loves them. And you must not thank us either, for are we not all bound to each other by the golden cords of love? And have we not the command to help one another as we have opportunity?’

‘It is like you to say so—but I shall be such a plague.’

‘One that we would not be without. Can you not see for yourself how it will add to the pleasure of all, to have you to discuss our plans with—to take you to see the building as it rises, and watch the interest of the people as they gradually learn what is being done for them, and grow to value it? There will be hindrances and discouragements, too, such as we have learned to look for; but I think you will like to share in all alike, and we will try, by God’s help, that the joy and the gladness shall outweigh all the rest.’

‘Oh yes, I am sure you will—and you will tell me everything. If only I could live to see the end of the work I think I could die without an ungratified wish. But, indeed, I am willing to give that up—indeed, I do not expect it. I know that His will is best—it is a foolish thought that I shall lose the joy of it if I am not here to see.’

‘Ah, Duke dear, perhaps you will be nearer us in spirit if absent in the flesh. For us who believe in the Communion of Saints there is no division of the Church. It is one and the same—militant or triumphant—and we are equally in that Communion whether

here below on earth or with our Risen Lord in Paradise. You will be with us, I am assured; and in that thought I think you may rest in patience.'

A beautiful light shone in Duke's dark eyes.

'Thank you, dear Aunt Dorothy, for saying that. I will try never to forget it.'

There was a long, long silence, which was interrupted at length by the entrance of the three little girls.

'Has mother told you, Duke?' cried Letty, ever the first with her tongue. 'Has she told you?—and are you pleased? Oh, do say you are!'

'I should be a queer kind of fellow if I were not,' he answered, a reflection of the light still shining in his eyes, making them very soft and tender. 'And so I am to have three little sisters of my very own to plague and make into little slaves. I wonder who will get tired of the new relationship first.'

'I shan't,' cried Letty.

'Nor I'—'Nor I,' shouted the other two with equal vehemence; and Letty, perching herself on the arm of Duke's sofa, and taking his hand in hers, added with conclusive gravity:

'Because, you see, we have all of us said how nice it would be to have a brother—not just lately, but always—and now that we have got a great big one all of our own, it isn't likely we should be such silly little things as to go and get tired of him directly.'

CHAPTER XXV

THE CLOSE AT AVONMINSTER

'Do you remember the first time we came to Avonminster?' cried Letty, jumping up and down in the railway-carriage with excitement, and craning to get a peep at the towers of the Cathedral, as the great engine steamed into the junction that cold December day. 'It seems as if that were the beginning of it all. It *was* the beginning of our getting to know the Bishop.'

The parents exchanged glances and smiled a little. Certainly very important results had come through the chain of circumstances that commenced with that journey six months ago, when the little sisters were left stranded at Avonminster.

'And it was all your fault, you naughty puss,' added Letty, poking her nose into the basket which contained the black kitten, now grown considerably more sober and staid. 'You blotted mother's letter, and that made Aunt Hilda read it wrong—wasn't it that, mother dear? Doesn't it seem funny? I wonder where we should all have been to-day if puss *hadn't* blotted it.'

But there was no time now to pursue such an abstruse

train of thought. The engine was drawing up, and there was the usual bustle consequent upon an arrival. Not that our travellers were overburdened with luggage, for all the bulkiest packages had gone in the big van a week ago, and Nanny had been sent in advance to meet it at the new house, and get a little order into the place before the arrival of the family. The furniture that had been left in it had been bought by the new Canon, and that, together with what they brought from Lincolnshire, must do for the present, as mother told the children. The big rooms would look rather bare, of course, and the curtains would be too short, and the carpets too small; but they must all make up their minds to little discomforts for a time, and things would come right by degrees.

Patty was old enough to understand that though father was now a richer man than he had ever been before, it would take some little time to furnish a large, expensive house out of income, unless he stinted his charities, which was not at all his way; and though the new Rectory would bring in a larger income than had been expected when he accepted it (before the new endowment was made) he did not intend to expend it upon himself, but to engage instead an additional curate, and institute many things that would cost money at first, though afterwards they might be self-supporting. So that the new Canon was not yet a rich man, and probably never would be. It had taken a good deal of money to put the old Rectory in order on leaving, and to remove the furniture; but the children were well satisfied with everything, and Cousin Duke was sure to be comfortable, for his father had

insisted on furnishing the rooms they had set apart for him.

It was quite dark as the carriage which conveyed them from the station rolled under the archway into the Close, but one door stood hospitably wide, and Letty fairly shrieked as they drew up before it to see the faithful Nanny beaming on them from just inside the threshold.

What a blaze of light seemed to pour out upon them from the new home; and what in the world had come to the house that had looked a little bare and gloomy always, and which they had expected to find in all the dreariness and confusion attendant upon first days after an arrival?

The big, panelled hall was illumined by a great hanging lamp that cast a soft warm light over everything, and the polished walls reflected the lustre, and looked anything but dark and dreary. On the floor of the inner hall was laid a thick Oriental carpet, into which the children's feet sank deeply, and there was antique carved furniture which made it into a regular room, and a very delightful one, instead of being a mere hall. Then from the doors which opened from it streamed out more warmth and light. The welcoming log fires flickered hospitably over rooms so beautiful that the children held their breath as they ran from one to another, almost believing that it was all a dream.

Drawing-room, dining-room, library, it did not matter where they ran, fresh surprises greeted them on every side. Rich, deep-toned carpets lay upon the floors, doors and windows were curtained with soft-

hued textures to correspond. The furniture was such as the little ones had only seen in the Bishop's Palace and their uncle's big house at Ravensthorpe. Even upstairs the fairy hands had been at work, beautifying and transforming the whole house. The dear old things from home were placed in the rooms to which they belonged, and were numerous enough to give a home-like aspect to places that might else have looked somewhat strange; but all else was new.

What did it all mean? Was it a surprise planned for them by their parents? Patty shook her head decidedly, certain that father and mother would not have spoken in the way they had done if this was any doing of theirs, and besides, it was so unlike them to spend such large sums of money upon themselves.

'Let us go and ask,' cried Letty, when at last every corner had been explored, and the culminating joy been found in the splendid collection of games, books, and toys that crowded the wainscoted nursery. The great rocking-horse seemed to Letty the crowning pinnacle of the whole structure; for though it had never occurred to her to covet such a thing for herself, the rides on her cousins' painted steed had been a source of untold joy to her.

So down ran the happy, eager children into the comfortable dining-room, the table of which stood spread with a regular traveller's tea, whilst the urn, spluttering and hissing at one end, seemed to be welcoming them in its own homely way.

Under the lamp stood father and mother, their heads bent over a letter that mother held in her hands. They

were talking earnestly together, but ceased as the children came in, and mother's eyes had that bright softness in them which seemed to speak of unshed tears.

'Oh, mother,' cried Letty, rushing and fastening upon her, 'it is all like a bit of a fairy tale! Did you do it?—did you know about it? Do tell us.'

'We are so surprised we don't know what to do,' added Dolly, getting fast hold of mother's hand.

'It is all the same all over the house.'

'Oh, have you seen the rocking-horse?'

'Or the stands of flowers in the windows?'

'Or the pictures?'

'Or the lovely furniture upstairs?'

'Or the dear little white beds in a row in our night nursery?'

'Oh, mother, do tell us; we are so excited! Did you do it all for a surprise?'

And mother held up her hands to her ears, laughing a little at all the hubbub, whilst father took Letty up in his arms, and put her up on the top of a high oak cabinet so as to be 'safely out of the way of mischief,' as he said, adding, laughing himself a little:

'How can mother answer so many questions, or explain anything at all when you all talk at once?'

And silence being thus obtained, mother looked once more at the letter in her hand, and said:

'Children, everything you see here that was not here before, and does not come from the old home, is a present from dear grandfather.'

The children gasped in their astonishment at the idea of such magnificent giving as this.

'Is *everything* from grandfather?' asked Letty in awe-stricken accents. 'The rocking-horse as well?'

'I think all comes from him,' answered mother; 'and it is just as much of a surprise to father and me as it is to you, dearies. It seems almost like a dream or a fairy tale, but here are the things to speak for themselves, and here is dear grandfather's letter. What must we say to him to thank him for his goodness?'

'We will love him a whole lot,' answered Letty, who felt that she had been rather deficient in this matter before. 'I don't think I properly—oh, what is the right word?—properly *appreciated* him before, but I do now. I think he is the dearest old grandfather. I can't think what put it into his head.'

'He says in his letter,' explained father, 'that as he has been so many years without making any presents to his little grandchildren or their parents, it occurred to him to make good the deficiency by a big giving of presents all round. He said it would save trouble, and make one business instead of a great many, and be simpler for everybody—wasn't that it, mother?'

'That was grandfather's way of putting it,' answered mother with shining eyes. 'But the real thing was that dear grandfather wanted to make this new home a very sweet and happy one for us, and he *has* done it by his kindness, which is ten times more precious to us all, I am sure, than even all these beautiful things.'

But the end of the surprises was not over yet, for as the children were darting in and out of the beautiful new rooms whilst Nanny was bringing in the tea, they heard a curious sort of creaking sound, and the next

moment, from the passage which led to the rooms which had been allotted to and altered for their invalid cousin—which they had not yet looked at—came the startling apparition of Duke himself, propelling himself slowly though easily along in a wheel-chair, his face all aglow with the pleasure of anticipation.

Letty's shouts of delight brought the parents out to see what more had been found; and Duke, freeing himself with some difficulty from the embraces of his little cousins, turned to them with an eager apology.

'I know I ought not to be here just as you must want to be by yourselves, but when I heard the children's voices I could not help coming out to see. But please forget that I am here for a day or two. I really did not mean to take possession till after your arrival; but there has been so much to see to that they wanted someone on the spot. And the doctors packed me in here during the warm days we had last week, for I'm not allowed to put my nose out of doors when it is the least bit cold. But indeed I won't intrude; I will go back to my own quarters. I know you must have no end of things to talk about together.'

'And a great many more to talk to you about,' was father's answer, as, putting the children aside, he pushed the wheel chair right into the dining-room. 'We all want to know what fairies have been at work; and it seems that you have been in their secrets.'

'And you are our boy now, you know,' added mother, stooping to kiss him. 'I don't know what my little girls would say to us if we excluded the brother from the family conclaves.'

So Duke was for the first time for many, many long years one of a happy family party, and as he sat at the well-spread board, and watched the bright faces around it, he felt that a new era was opening for him, and that the last page of his life would surely prove the brightest.

‘It’s so nice to see you wheeling yourself about,’ said Letty, who had established herself beside him, and was making him her special charge. ‘I didn’t know if you would be able to come into our rooms. I am so glad.’

‘So am I. It was a capital idea. The Bishop thought of it. I can’t use crutches; I suppose I am clumsy or stupid, but they tire me to death, and I thought I should have to keep always to the sofa; but then this chair came, and it is the finest contrivance in the world. I can go anywhere in it except up and down stairs. Perhaps some day, when the weather gets warm again, if I am able, I shall be allowed to go to the cathedral,’ and his face fairly glowed.

‘And to St. Ursula’s, when it is begun,’ added Letty, jumping up and down in her seat. ‘Oh, I do so want to go there and see the place now that it is really ours. Do the two curates like the house? Are they living there now?’

‘Yes, they went in last week, when it was put in order for them. I believe they are very comfortable. But there is nothing else to see yet. You know we cannot begin to build in mid-winter. But you shall see all the plans. There will be a great deal to talk about, and the old church has been patched up so

that it will do pretty well till the new one is ready. It does not look quite so dismal now as it did, they tell me.'

'Well, that is very nice, because, of course, we shall go oftenest to father's church, and it would seem so horrid after our own dear little church at home. Oh, dear, I can't hardly believe that it isn't our church any more. We couldn't help crying, all of us, last Sunday, when father preached his farewell sermon, and almost all the people cried too. It was very sad. But Mr. Bolton is *very* nice, and they are all fond of him. But I hope we shan't often have to leave our parishes; it isn't at all a nice feeling.'

'Did the people like their presents?' asked Duke, to change the current of her thoughts.

'Oh yes, indeed they did. I want to tell Hilda and Chi and all of them about it, because it was so kind of them to make the collection. I wonder when we shall see them all next. Mother, dear, shall we soon be going to Ravensthorpe?'

'I don't know, Letty; I think we shall have enough to keep us at home for the present. But how do you think it would be to have Ravensthorpe here? Don't you think it would do almost as well?'

'Oh, mother, dear, what do you mean?'

'I mean, don't you think it would be a nice plan to ask them all to spend Christmas here? Uncle and auntie and grandfather, and all the cousins too, and have a real family party once again—a sort of house-warming, as they call it? My little girls have never seen anything like that before. Suppose you run and see if we have bedrooms enough for everybody. I have

not had time to go upstairs yet, but it seems as if the fairies had been at work all over alike. You run and tell me if we could accommodate such a large party ; and if we can, I will write my letter to-night.'

The happy children ran off, and returned in due course with glowing faces.

'Yes, there is room, mother, with a little crowding for us children. And we have plenty of extra beds, because all the rooms have new ones, and ours are hardly wanted at all. They are all piled away in a big attic-place, and we can sleep up there ourselves and give the boys our room, and then there will be plenty of room for everybody. Oh, how nice it would be ! Only Nanny says you must ask Aunt Hilda to bring some servants with her, because there are only the cook and the housemaid besides herself yet, and they couldn't make such a lot of people comfortable.'

'And the new servants are so nice,' added Dolly. 'The cook showed us her kitchen, and it is very like the crypt in the cathedral ; it has the same kind of roof. I am sure she will be kind to Annie when she comes. I told her we were going to have a kitchen-maid from our old parish, and she was quite pleased. She said she liked country girls better than town ones.'

Everything was *couleur-de-rose* to the happy children that night, and they persuaded their parents to let them sit up till the Bishop came, for Duke said he intended just to look in during the course of the evening ; and perhaps their sleep was all the sweeter for his fatherly blessing, and certainly the delights of the new home drove away all sad thoughts for the one they had left behind, dear as its memory must ever remain.

And then that happy Christmas gathering!

Nothing the least bit like it had ever happened before; and when the big house was packed full of people, and the little sisters were busy from morning till night attending to the comfort of their guests, and paying them every attention in their power, they thought that nothing in the world could be so nice, and everybody looked so happy, that it was a pleasure to watch the faces assembled round the table, as the party met from time to time to exchange news and make plans for the ensuing hours. Hilda threw herself heart and soul into the parish work. There was little time to get things ready for a real Christmas gathering such as the little country children had been accustomed to; but the curates had not been idle, and they had had instructions from their absent Rector, so a room had been hired, and there was to be a tea there on Christmas Eve for some of the people; and there was to be a children's table too, for the few Sunday scholars and such other children as the little sisters had made friends with; and though there seemed wonderfully little enthusiasm or delight in the prospect, as compared with the rapture of the village children over their treats, it was at least a beginning, and the rector's little daughters were busy all day long in devising ways of winning their new little parishioners' confidence, and trying to get them to be interested and pleased.

Chi offered to conjure for them in a small way, and he went through some simple tricks so cleverly in the drawing-room one night, that it was agreed by acclamation that he should give a brief entertainment to the

little people on the night itself. He and Hilda and Letty were to dress up, magician-fashion, and go through as many of the tricks as Chi could manage with their assistance; and so successfully did it all turn out on the night, that the parents, as well as the children, insisted on being admitted to the mysteries, and the knowledge that the little ladies and gentlemen had taken the trouble to get it up for them brought a warmer feeling into many hearts than had been there for long enough before. Then there was something in the way in which their new clergyman addressed them that could not but go to their hearts, and the sweet looks of his wife and the eager friendliness of the children won them still more. The people were used to neglect, or the most formal of visits, and true pastoral care was new and strange to them. They had heard rumours that had given rise to much surprise, and even a little suspicion, but now many were beginning to have something of the blessed feeling, 'peace on earth, good-will towards men.'

And whilst the clergyman's family and some of their guests worked hard for the people of St. Lawrence's, there were others at home engaged in preparing a Christmas treat for the little folk from the fens who were too busy to think of themselves, and who had never been used to look for what so many children take as an absolute right.

It turned out that a Christmas-tree was an unknown mystery to the three little sisters, and so Aunt Hilda and Jessie put their heads together, and with the co-operation of grandfather, made up such a wonderful tree as had scarcely been seen before in Avonminster.

And it was designed not for the young people of the house alone, but for some of the better-class children of the place who could not be included in the first treat, but who had been asked to tea in the Close—an honour that had greatly awed and equally enchanted them.

A short time back Jessie would have thought it a bore to have to take thought for 'common children,' and her mother might hardly have cared to undertake such a piece of work; but a different spirit had now come over the household, and they were as eager over this secret as the children over their plans.

Preparations were carried on in Duke's room, as the safest place of retreat, and he entered into the matter heart and soul. He was now so courteous and deferential to his step-mother, and withal so gentle and eager to please her, that she learned to look to him more than to her own boys, who had a way of forgetting the little things asked of them. But Duke never forgot, and was so glad to be of use that his time became more fully occupied than it had ever been before; and if this was for him the first Christmas spent in a truly Christmas spirit, there were others who felt that they might say the same without going far beyond the mark.

And what a nice party it was when the day once came!

'I'd no idea it was such fun to amuse children who aren't used to it,' Chi remarked afterwards. 'At the children's parties one mostly goes to, the young 'uns are *blasé* before they ever come at all, and one can't get a rise out of them anyhow; but these little beggars

were awfully jolly when once they had got the courage to open their lips without looking scared. It was twice the fun I expected.'

And the tree ?

Well, that was, of course, the crowning delight, because it was equally a surprise to the hosts and visitors. The passage to Duke's room, where it was displayed, was lighted up with Japanese lanterns, cleverly disposed amongst the glossy holly and graceful mistletoe, and the wondering children were conducted along to the sound of low, sweet music from Duke's violin, accompanied by Jessie upon the piano. The room into which they were ushered was dark, save for a glow of soft light that penetrated from behind a curtain, whence proceeded the sounds of the music. And then when all the little people were arranged in a semicircle before the curtain, it was suddenly dropped, and a great gasp of delighted admiration burst simultaneously from all.

It really was a very pretty tree, so tastefully arranged and lighted, so glittering with tinsel and glass, and all those pretty trifles that go to make a charming effect. And then there was Jessie, dressed like a fairy—and a very charming fairy she looked,—and an old, old wizard with a white beard almost down to his waist, who was reclining in what looked like the mouth of a cave. And he really must be a wizard, the children thought, for he knew all their names, and called them out one by one, and told the fairy what to give to each, and it seemed to every child that he or she had got the very thing they liked best; and although there was nothing costly there, the pleasure

was just as great, and the boxes of sweetmeats and pretty trinkets with which the children were quite laden gave an amount of pleasure that it would have been impossible to exceed by the most lavish outlay.

How pleased father and mother were—and what a clamorous thanking there was when the little guests had gone! It had been indeed a happy day for all, and it was the concluding Christmas festivity of the season.

‘Oh, Aunt Dorothy!’ sighed Hilda, as she said good-night; ‘I do so hope you will ask us to spend every Christmas with you. I don’t know how it is, but we have never had half such a nice one before, and I should like to have another to look forward to all next year.’

CHAPTER XXVI

IN THE CATHEDRAL

HILDA came to Avonminster to be prepared for her confirmation. It had been decided by the Bishop that he would hold one in the cathedral on the eve of Whitsuntide, and Hilda had earnestly begged to be allowed to be prepared for it by her uncle, and to remain for her first Communion in that place.

This wish was readily granted her. She was the first of her family who had looked upon her confirmation with real seriousness. Hector and Jessie had gone up for it, one from school and the other from home, very much as a matter of form. They had been confirmed young, rather under than over the customary age, and possibly they had been scarcely old enough to enter into the meaning of the holy rite, or to realize the blessing and the privilege to which it opened the way. But though Hilda was no older—not quite fifteen, she had thought a great deal about it, and entered upon her preparation with a great deal of earnest thought and purpose. It was, perhaps, owing to her influence that Chi wrote to his mother from school, and asked if he might be confirmed with Hilda during the brief Whitsuntide holidays. There

was no confirmation that year at school, but one of the masters, who was in Holy Orders, had promised to prepare him, and he much wished to join Hilda if his parents would consent.

No difficulty, of course, was raised, and Hilda looked very happy when she heard the news. Chi had always been her own favourite brother, with whom she had shared her aspirations and ambitions, and it was no little satisfaction to her now to think that they were still in accord over this important step, and that they were to take it together, as they had shared so much in the past.

But Hilda was to have a companion in her preparation of whom she had never dreamed. She came to Avonminster, upon her aunt's invitation, a month before the confirmation, to pass a quiet time there, where she could secure undisturbed leisure for reading and study, and receive instruction from her uncle. This invitation had been accepted most gratefully by the girl, who loved her aunt dearly, and always felt a sense of rest and peace in that home. And then it was to her aunt that she found herself best able to speak on the subjects near to her heart, for there was something about Aunt Dorothy that made speech easy. So it may well be understood how glad Hilda was to come to Avonminster.

Her companion in her studies and in some of the lessons given by her uncle was none other than her half-brother Duke.

She had been very much surprised when she had heard it, and asked why he had not been confirmed at school.

‘It was like this—I did not much care about it, as I was in no mood to appreciate anything of that kind, and I had a sort of idea that I should have to turn over a new leaf, and be expected to give up my pet aversions and all that, which I was not in the least prepared to do; however, as all the fellows of my age and standing were going up, I went too, and was prepared with them: but I caught a bad cold just before the day, and quinsy came on, and so I could not attend the service after all. Nobody knew, as it happened, for father was abroad, and I never said a word, and you know we were pretty casual at home about those things then.’

‘And did nobody ever ask?’

‘No; I hardly ever saw any of you, and even if I did, nothing was ever said, and before very long I cut adrift altogether, and so, you see, I have gone all these years without thinking or caring, and now I am going to be confirmed here. I have had a long talk with the Bishop, and he promises that I shall be confirmed, even if he has to come to me for it; but it is almost certain that I shall be able to get to the cathedral. I am so much better in the hot weather, and it will be nearly June by that time.’

Duke was looking very worn and thin, but still he lingered on, the peaceful happiness of his present life doing more than any doctor’s skill to fan the flickering flame of life. Then with the warmer weather came a certain access of strength, which gave him power to join the family party sometimes, and to enter into his studies and preparation with deep interest and pleasure.

And there were other things besides that combined to make this visit to the Close a very pleasant thing. The Church of St. Ursula was rising fast, and almost every day Hilda and her little cousins paid it a visit, to see what progress had been made, and bring back detailed reports to the invalid at home.

The building was of the white stone of the neighbourhood, and the design, though very simple, was full of a lofty dignity that gave it a distinct character of its own. The church formed one side of a sort of quadrangle, another of which was occupied by the old house and garden. At present this was practically a clergy-house, and was occupied by the two curates, who, under the Rector, were labouring energetically to get the overgrown and neglected neighbourhood into something like order. The school-house and little hospital or home were to form the third side, whilst on the fourth was to be the churchyard, where green meadow-land sloped downwards towards the river, sufficiently distant from the populous part of the suburb to be set apart for that purpose without detriment to the community.

It was indeed a joyful day for many when, one balmy afternoon in May, Duke was driven down in the Bishop's carriage to look for the first time on the church of his own building. The Bishop sat beside him, and Letty was opposite, unable to forego the pleasure of watching how he would look when he first saw it, though the others had started earlier to be on the spot to receive him on his arrival, everyone wanting to take part in the expedition of to-day.

Perhaps the little girl was a trifle disappointed at

Duke's extreme quietness as the carriage drew up at the nearest point to the building in course of construction, and she eagerly pointed out its many beauties; which, however, existed more in the knowledge of what would be, than in what was already to be seen. Still, if he said little, there was a light in his eyes which told a tale of its own; and when, after their survey was completed, the Bishop said to him with a good deal of feeling:

'At least, your work will endure. You will be the means, under God, of bringing back to the fold of Christ's Church many of her ignorant and erring children,' he answered in a low voice full of repressed emotion:

'I cannot think how it is I have been allowed—it seems too much honour and happiness.' And if Letty was a little disappointed that this was all that could be got out of him, there were others who rejoiced in an answer so full of humility.

This first visit to the rising church was by no means the last. As the weather grew warmer, driving was much recommended for Duke, and his father kept a carriage and horse at the livery stables for his son's sole use. Thus on many fine days he and his cousins would make an excursion thither, and Letty became much more satisfied that he really was pleased with it all than she had been on the first occasion. It was very interesting to all to watch the progress of the work, and as time was from the first made an object of the greatest importance, and the builders were under contract, it made visible strides almost from day to day, and even the impatience of the children was almost satisfied.

Duke became acquainted about this time with both the curates engaged by Mr. Rose, and after the first effort at making new acquaintances, he found in them pleasant companions, in whose visits he took great pleasure.

As for the Rector's little daughters, they were as busy as bees and as happy as birds in the new home and the new parish. Every morning was given up to lessons at one of the houses in the Close, where there were other children of their age, whose studies they shared, and with whom a very pleasant and wholesome friendship was soon established. In the evening they had light tasks to prepare for the following day; but these were often done in Duke's room, and he was the general referee in difficulties, and had a way of making the dullest lessons interesting. But the afternoons were always free, and more often than not one or another of them would accompany father or mother on a parish round, or drive down with Duke to see the progress made by the workmen. They were such pets with the housekeeper at the clergy-house that they ran in and out almost at will, and in case of sickness or urgency of any kind they could always run thither for soup or wine, or anything that might be needed in a hurry. And at home they had a little kitchen of their very own, which was a source of the greatest interest and pleasure. Their parents had given it to them with the needful implements for a little simple cookery, and their old favourite, Annie, from the Lincolnshire parish, gave them regular instruction in the making of soup and light puddings, and little inexpensive dishes suitable for weakly children or convalescents; and Patty

was growing into such a clever little cook that she had been trusted sometimes with a more elaborate receipt, and had achieved some quite grand results.

It was always mother's wish that her little daughters should grow up useful and practical women, and this amateur kitchen was one of her methods of training them to a knowledge of the value of skilled labour. They grew to have a great respect for the cleverness of the cook, who could turn out dainty dishes so regularly and easily, and by degrees their own small experiences enabled them to give many practical hints to the hard-worked mothers of their small parish friends as to the best way of making a nice dinner out of odds and ends. These hints were taken much better as a rule from childish lips than they might have been from any other quarter.

So, though it was uphill work at first, and results seemed very small in proportion to the amount of labour expended, a humanizing as well as a Christianizing element was at work in the place, and a new and happier feeling sprang up between the classes of the community, who no longer felt as if a great gulf divided them. The beautiful church rising in their sight was a visible proof that they were cared for in a solid fashion, and even poor dismal St. Lawrence's began to fill on Sundays, and to collect a sprinkling of congregation on week-days, now that the people were learning to love and respect their pastor, and to wish to listen to his teaching. 'The Mission,' as it was sometimes called in Avonminster, thrived beyond the hopes of the most sanguine, and the good Bishop went about with a lightened heart, for the

miserable state of a portion of his own fair cathedral city had long weighed heavily on his mind, whilst he had been almost powerless to remedy the evil.

He was little at home just now, for he was holding a round of confirmations in the diocese, of which the one in his own cathedral was to be the last.

Letty always asserted that she missed him very much, and she certainly was the prime favourite at the Palace, whilst Dolly's childish devotion was lavished mainly upon grandfather; and on his now frequent visits to Avonminster she was his constant companion. Not being quite so strong as either of her sisters, and a good deal more shy and retiring, she was essentially the home-bird of the party, mother's right-hand in every little matter within her capacity, and the willing slave and messenger of grandfather or Duke.

Indeed, she and Duke became fast friends during these days; and though Letty always looked upon him as especially her property, he saw almost more of quiet little Dolly, who would bring her needlework into his room at every odd moment, and sit with him whilst others were out, never feeling it tiresome, though many times she would have accompanied mother or sisters but for the thought that 'poor Duke would be all alone.'

Dolly's unselfishness was of the silent unobtrusive kind that is seldom quite appreciated, and wins but little comment or praise; but that was no disappointment to the gentle little girl, who was certainly most unconscious that there was any self-denial involved in her daily acts of thoughtfulness and care.

Sometimes she would talk to Duke in the twilight about the approaching confirmation, describing those she had witnessed at home, and recalling little fragments of the discourse given by the Bishop on the occasion, or of the sermons preached by her father immediately before and after. Some very sweet and grand thoughts were thus brought home to Duke by the reminiscences of the thoughtful little maiden, and he would communicate them to Hilda, or get Dolly to do so if her shyness would let her; and so the bright days flew by, each one as it passed being marked by an imperceptible advance, until the holy Festival was very near, and its approach brought Chi to Avonminster, eager to receive a little final instruction from his uncle before the confirmation day should come.

It was a great source of happiness to Hilda to have him to share the solemn privilege with her, and the brothers and sister spent many hours together in Duke's room, or in the warm sheltered garden, either sitting silent, or talking in low tones together of their regret for past carelessness and irreverence, or their longings for the future. Possibly the knowledge that Duke's days were numbered threw a shadow of greater seriousness over them all. They had grown used so gradually and so long to the idea, that it did not strike them as it would have done if it had been anything new; but it was impossible not to think of it often, and it brought with it the realization—often so difficult to the young—that they, too, would be called upon in due course to lay down the burden of life, with all its brightness and pleasure, and pass away into the unseen land whence no traveller returns. And yet with

that knowledge, brought so clearly home, came the earnest conviction of the reality of the great, undivided Church from which nothing could separate them either in life or death so long as they were sealed the servants of the King, and looked to His Cross for salvation.

And so one beautiful summer morning, very early, long before the service was to begin, Duke found himself settled with Chi in a seat prepared for him very near to the altar-rails, from which seat he could look right down the glorious vista of pillar and arch to the end of the grand hoary structure, and offer up deep and heartfelt praise that he was permitted, ere it was too late, to renew in this holy place the vows which long ago had sealed him as a soldier and servant of Jesus Christ.

He had been before to the cathedral, but not to this part; and something in the silence and emptiness of the vast place brought with it a sense of deep solemnity and awe. The glorious sunshine streaming in through rich-toned glass seemed almost like the reflection of the rainbow 'round about the throne,' and when the strains of the organ began to echo along the vaulted roof, it was as if, to ears attuned, were audible the triumph-song of the white-robed multitude within the pearly gates of Paradise.

It was with the feeling that it was all part of an oft-repeated dream that he saw the great church fill with worshippers. The brief impressive service, the solemn renewal of vows, 'in the presence of God and of this congregation,' the breathless hush which followed, until a rustle and the soft sweep of garments told that the laying on of hands had commenced. They could

see Hilda, as she knelt, her young face full of awe and resolute purpose, her hands closely clasped, as if in earnest prayer. Nor were other prayers lacking to her; and the boys bent lower as the Bishop laid his hands upon that dark, bowed head.

Almost the last of all, Chi touched Duke, and helped his feeble uncertain steps to the altar-rail. Side by side they knelt, brothers in more than name, and together heard the words of blessing that were pronounced, as it seemed, with an intensity of feeling that bespoke a deep and fatherly regard:

‘Defend, O Lord, these Thy children with Thy heavenly grace, that they may continue Thine for ever; and daily increase in Thy Holy Spirit more and more, until they come to Thine everlasting kingdom; Amen.’

Once again, within a brief space, Duke, Hilda, and Chi knelt in that cathedral, whilst the early gold of a summer’s morning streamed in upon them from the great east window, resting upon each down-bent head, as if it brought a message from the golden city whither their steps were turned.

Once more the Bishop stood before each in turn, this time with the Bread of Life in his hands—that mystical ‘Body of our Lord Jesus Christ,’ given to each of His children who will accept His gracious invitation and come to the Table prepared in His name—and as from his hands and those of their uncle they received for the first time the consecrated bread and wine, they felt from the very depths of their hearts that this admission into the innermost sanctuary

demanded from them an increased effort after holiness, a more resolute determination to live as the children of light--the heirs of that blessed inheritance of which moments like these seemed a foretaste.

And Duke, as he knelt there, knowing that the call for him might soon come, felt that he could say from his heart, 'Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace;' for had he not already received the highest of earthly good? and could it be thought hard or sad to be called to the blessed rest of the faithful multitude who 'die in the Lord'?

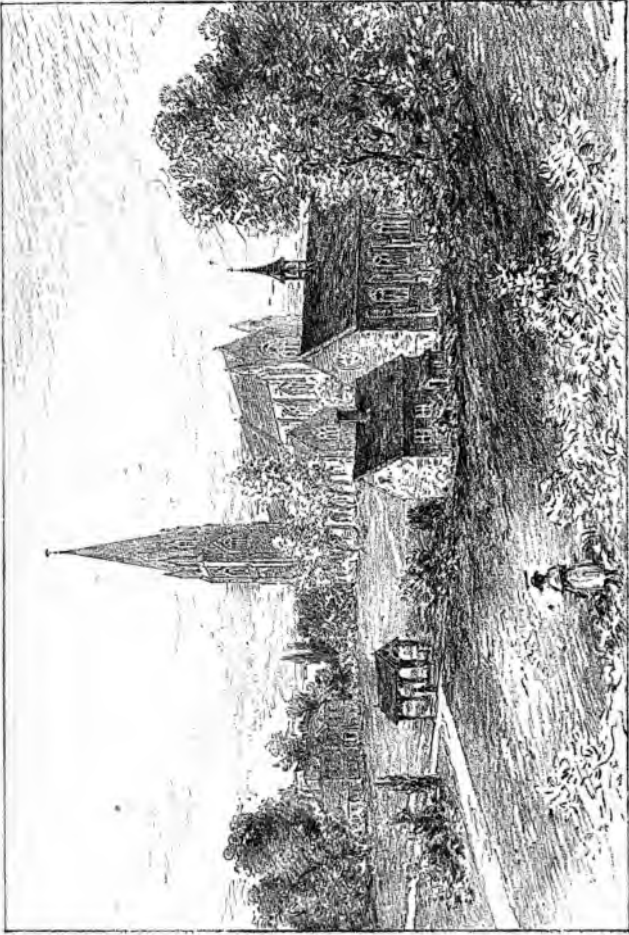
CHAPTER XXVII

FAREWELL

A YEAR has passed, and once more we are in the city of Avonminster.

It would be evident even to a stranger who trod the streets of certain parts of the city that day that something of an unusual character was going on. People were all streaming in one direction. Many clergymen were to be seen, bag in hand, hurrying on at a faster pace than the others, most of whom seemed to belong to the poor houses of the neighbourhood, though several of them had made an attempt to give a touch of holiday brightness to their attire.

The goal to which they were all bound was a fine white stone church, whose tapering spire—all but finished now—rose high into the clear blue sky as if pointing the way upwards. There were other buildings near to it, both new and old—the new ones being complete only externally—whilst the sloping meadow behind, with its quaint lich-gate and old yews and ever-greens, seemed a fitting resting-place for those who should be called from the hurry and strife of life to the hallowed calm of God's acre. And although it lay close on the outskirts of a populous and increasing



ST. URSULA'S CHURCH.



town, some of the old calm of past days clung yet about it.

Large as was the church, it would hardly contain the numbers that came flocking to the consecration to-day. For not only did almost all the true parishioners desire to see the ceremony, but all Avonminster was more or less excited about it.

Nothing could have been more favourable than the weather. It was hot and bright, without excessive sultriness, and as the people gathered round the church the question was freely passed from mouth to mouth :

‘ Will *he* be here to-day ? ’

And none amongst these poorer folks seemed able to answer the inquiry, though it was evidently one of the points which interested them most.

And whose was the presence so eagerly waited for ? None other, in fact, than that of the young founder of the church, who had watched its slow construction with intense interest from the first. His thin, white face had grown familiar to the people of the neighbourhood during the two summers that the church had been building, but latterly he had been more and more rarely seen, and through the entire month of June he had never once been down to see how the work prospered.

And leaving the eager, expectant crowd awaiting the coming of the Bishop and the commencement of the solemn ceremony, let us enter a quiet room in the Close, and see what its occupants are doing, and why they are not at the gathering-place that has attracted half the population of the town.

On his invalid couch, drawn up to the window, which stood wide open to the warm summer air, lay Duke, wasted to a mere shadow, whilst beside him sat little Dolly, with a paper in her hand—the little leaflet that contained the order of the service that was shortly to begin.

A year had made but little change in the child. The smooth, cropped head, the serious, sweet eyes, the simple style of dress, were all the same as before. Only the little maiden had grown in body as well as mind, and the shy diffidence of manner was blended now with a touch of childlike self-possession, which sat wonderfully well upon the Canon's little daughter. For the rest, Dolly still kept her old character of true home-bird, and it had surprised nobody that she had elected to be Duke's companion this afternoon, in lieu of seeing the ceremony of consecration—deeply as she was interested in 'our church.' And for Duke to undergo the excitement and fatigue was manifestly impossible. He did not even desire it for himself. He was so weak that the fatigue of dressing and being wheeled into his sitting-room was as much as he could bear, and he knew, if others did not, that he had seen the church for the last time six weeks or more ago.

He had passed through the winter pretty well, and during the first weeks of the hot weather he had seemed to make real progress: but it had been like the flicker of the dying lamp, and had been followed by a steady and rapid declension, from which there appeared to be no power to rally. But he was very patient always, and very happy. He often said that

these months had been by far the happiest of his life, and he had no dread of death, for he had learnt to look upon it as a friend, rather than as a foe.

He had lived to see the accomplishment of his most heartfelt wish, and his gratitude was great. As he lay now, looking out over the sunny garden and bright flower-borders, he let the events of the past two years rise in review before him, and his heart swelled with a deep thanksgiving. How tenderly the Father in Heaven had watched over him and led him to the light out of the mists of darkness and dread he could see now as no one else could do. And not only had He thus led him, but He had permitted him to do this work in His name, and leave behind him a memorial of his loving thanksgiving for all the benefits bestowed upon him. Then, too, he was in such perfect peace with all, and so surrounded by tenderness and care. It seemed so very sweet and beautiful—he could not understand it, and the liquid brightness in his eyes told of a heart filled to overflowing.

At last, as the clock struck the hour, and the echo of the chime died away, Dolly's soft voice began the reading of the service that was even then commencing at St. Ursula's.

In heart and spirit they followed it together, picturing the scene almost as if they had been there to see—the tall white spire with its cross pointing ever upwards, the crowds of worshippers assembled to give thanks and swell the notes of praise, the long white-robed procession of choristers and clergy with their own dear Bishop at its head. They saw it all, and the hearts of

both were full, for even the child entered into the spirit of the day with a great deal of comprehension, and the look on Duke's face helped her to understand all that it was to him.

It seemed a long time after they had finished their service before the sound they were waiting for broke upon their ears, but at last Dolly, who was standing a little way out in the garden, came springing back, her face all aglow.

'Oh, Duke, I hear them ; the bells—the bells !'

In another instant he heard them too, for the wind was in the right quarter, and brought the soft sweet notes pealing through the air. His face lighted with a beautiful look as he lay and listened, but he did not speak, and it was Dolly's voice that at last broke the silence.

'Oh, I am so glad there are bells ; it is like hearing the people called every Sunday. It *must* help them to love the beautiful church. It was so good of the Bishop ; for if it had not been for him, we should never have had them.'

That was true enough ; for after the details of the plan were complete, it was found that even the munificent gift of Duke's whole fortune would hardly meet every demand ; and when it became a choice between the peal of bells and the little parish hospital, Duke had decided for the latter, though he had set his heart greatly on the bells. Then it was that the Bishop had come forward and headed a subscription-list with a handsome sum, and the Canons, together with Sir Marmaduke and his wife and father-in-law,

had contributed the rest. And so the musical peal, now rung for the first time by the well-practised cathedral ringers, was not Duke's gift, but that of those who loved him and had given it partly for his sake. And perhaps that was why the liquid notes sounded so strangely sweet, that he could not trust his voice to speak, or to answer the eager child; and Dolly, half-guessing how it stood with him, gave him a loving little kiss, and ran back into the garden to listen and await the coming of the others.

It was, as she expected, Letty who first came racing back, having left her own party and joined one of the earliest carriage-loads returning to the Close, so as to be the first to bring word to Duke how it had all gone off.

'Oh, it was so lovely, only it was so hot! I hardly could breathe. It's a good thing you did not try to go, Duke dear; you would have had to go out. But it *was* so nice. I never saw a church consecrated before; and our Bishop did it—oh! so beautifully. I nearly cried, part of the time, and some people quite did. And we prayed for you, Duke dear—we did indeed; everybody thought of you, I know, and there was a sound as if there were some sobs in the "Amens." And it was so beautiful outside, too, when we went round the churchyard. The sun *did* so shine, and it all seemed so happy and so lovely. I *shall* love St. Ursula's. It will always seem as if it belonged to us and to the poor people. That is just what they said themselves: that it seemed like a church for *them*.'

And Duke's eyes shone with a glad light; for it was

just that which had been the aim and object of the whole.

Every member of the family dropped in for a few words with Duke on the return from the ceremony, and each one came laden with some fresh detail to add to his comprehension and pleasure. There had been a regular gathering of his brothers and sisters to be present at the consecration, and not one was missing from the family group that assembled in his room, at his express desire, to have tea after the rather fatiguing afternoon.

That part of the ceremony had been arranged between him and his little cousins some days ago; and Patty had made some of her own best cakes for the occasion, and now stood behind the tea equipage, with Dolly, of course, beside her, pouring out the tea, and playing the part of Duke's little hostess, which he had assigned to her. Hilda and Chi sat beside the invalid's couch, giving him a more detailed and connected account of the proceedings than he had heard as yet; Hector moved about, handing cups, and throwing in a word every now and then in a way which showed how thoroughly at home and at one he was with his elder brother now, whilst the Canon and the Baronet conversed together a little apart, and grandfather was besieged by Punch and Judy for a description of such of the proceedings as their small stature had not enabled them to see.

The two sisters sat hand in hand, looking with a kind of proud gladness upon the handsome group of children, nieces and nephews, whilst pretty Jessie gave

an eye to the tea-makers, and offered assistance whenever it seemed needed.

Suddenly there was a cry of :

‘Here’s the Bishop!’ and Letty, who had been posted at the window, darted out, and returned in a few moments triumphantly ushering in both the Bishop and his wife.

Duke’s eyes lighted with pleasure as the kindly Prelate made his way to his side, and, bending down, spoke a few words that brought a wave of colour over his white face. But it was evident to all that he had gone through as much excitement that day as was good for him, and so the talk that circulated was not allowed to pass the limits of what was safe and on the surface. Deeper feelings were there, but for the present they were kept out of sight.

‘I think we ought to have some toasts,’ cried Hector, ‘though, to be sure, we can only drink them in tea and coffee just at this moment ; but it’s the kind of occasion that seems to require something of the kind, so I propose “The Lord Bishop of the Diocese.”’

It was received with acclamation, and the Bishop bowed his acknowledgments, made a happy little speech, and proposed in turn :

‘The Rector of St. Ursula’s.’

‘Now for the founder,’ cried somebody when this had been duly received ; but Duke sat up and looked round with shining eyes, saying, in response :

‘No, please not that. I have something better to propose. I am very grateful to you all, but I do not want to be toasted myself, so let me propose to you

as a substitute—and I am sure you will all approve it: “The little girls to whom I owe so much—but for whom St. Ursula’s might never have been built—who came to us fresh from the fens; but who are now so necessary to Avonminster that they will never be allowed to go back—I propose, therefore, our three rosebuds—Patty, Dolly and Letty.”’

THE END.





